

## Foucault, Discourse, Knowledge, Culture and Archeology

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### Abstract

The paper will mainly focus on Foucault's discussion on his notion of 'discourse' and his dynamic conceptualization of knowledge, which has such an enormous influence in cultural analysis. He refutes the 'fons et origo' of discourse and calls for treating it as and when it occurs. He says that forms of continuity and unity are just the result of a construction following the rules with its own justification. He suggests that there is no 'human essence' but what a given society understands human beings to be at any given point is a product of the kind of discourses that it produces about itself. This can be seen as an anti-essentialist claim. This notion of man is also not in the line with humanism. It marks a break with humanism inasmuch as it de-centres the individual as the prior agent in creating the social world, rejecting subjectivity as something essential, and prior to discourse, which power acts against. What will be further discussed is his dynamic conceptualization of knowledge and his attention to thresholds of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Foucault, Discourse, Knowledge, Archeology, Epistemic break.

### Epistemic Break, Criticism and Modern Thought

Foucault's major work *Order of Things* talks about the radical break between Classical and modern thought which occurred towards the end of the eighteenth century. Further in his work *Discipline and Punish*, he talks about how the norms of discourses helped in the operation of disciplinary power. In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault says that modern medicine emerged in the form of a clinical science<sup>1</sup> which offered a plentitude of new

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, 1963/2003: xvii.

experience of disease. This new experience of disease made it possible to have a historical and critical understanding of the old experience. It made it possible to have a new and different understanding of the madness in the light of new experience, helping remove the Classical treatment of mad people and thus the rational methods to which the mad people were subjected in the Classical age. Thus the medical rationality has now the access to the copious amount of perception, which enabled one to get to the very grain of things offering the first glimpse of truth. So, now to perceive is no longer just the matter of just seeing. This inseparability or the oneness of to see and to perceive was what was preached by rationalist philosophers like Descartes and Malebranche.

Foucault says that the modern age is an age of criticism. We now have the reign of criticism because now only criticism matters and it also indicates its fatality as it subjects everything to criticism. The heralding of the age of criticism found growing acceptance among positivists and also exhorted them as it supplied appropriate conditions for the nurturing of their practices. Nietzsche has also already emphasized the importance of criticism in modern time. He calls even philosophy criticism<sup>2</sup> and critical science. He says it is critics who do a tremendous job to mankind as they take everything that has happened till now and render it distinct, intelligible and manageable and subdue the whole past. The philosophical labourers and men of science have to do the formal assessments of value which over a period of time establishes itself as truths. Even actual philosopher himself has to first don the task of critics as they are used as instruments by them before becoming a man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the promoters of mankind. They reach for the future with creative hands and their knowing is their will to truth<sup>3</sup>.

So, criticism and positivism came on the scene in the modern age as the age of representation declined. At the same time there is the metaphysics of the object. This is the metaphysics of non-objectifiable depth of objects. It is from here objects rise up towards human's superficial knowledge. Foucault in 'The Order of the Things' says that criticism,

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<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, 1886/2003: 141.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 143.

positivism and metaphysics formed the triangle. They formed the triangle of the object. This criticism-positivism-metaphysics triangle constituted modern European thought from the beginning of the nineteenth century, marking the break from the Classical thought.

### **Classical Thought, Archeology and Discourse**

In Classical thought, the problem consisted in discovering a nomenclature that would be a taxonomy. The Classical thought's major problem to lay bare the relations between name and order arise from Classical age ontological standing that being is offered to representation without interruption. But as the new thought emerged in the modern age, it now became evident that it is possible to know only phenomena and its laws and not substances and essences. So it not the ideal essences that determine the order of concrete things but rather the hidden historical forces inside it determine the order of things. A new concept of the sign emerged under the new conception of order.

As now human delved the depths of life, critical thinking made the way for the phenomenal realm to take the centre stage. The phenomenal realm now became the only area of concern for the human's epistemological endeavor, which led to the synthetic notion of life. It helped give rise to the modern conception of knowledge, which created the conditions of possibility of modern discourses of biology, philology, and economics. The positivism, which indicates a reversion to the classical thought, owes its genesis to the importance which now gets attached to the phenomenal world. Man now emerges as a strange empirico-transcendental doublet<sup>4</sup> as the empirical contents of man served to reveal the conditions of knowledge.

In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault describes discourses such as biology, medicine, psychiatry as discursive formation. He sees discursive formation as a system of dispersion for the elements of discursive formation. It acts as the space in which various objects emerge and get continuously transformed. A discursive formation is a collection of statements which observes the rules of formation. He does not hold a discursive formation to

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault, 1966/2002: 347.

be defined by any unity of objects, manner of statement, concepts, or method. Rather it functions as a system of dispersion for its elements. It is the rules of formation that govern the formation of statements that define the unity of a discursive formation.

Traditional historical inquiry and Foucault's archeology both need documents or the collections of statements to commence with. But the way they treat documents differs in a significant way. Conventional history of ideas uses documents to get to the intention, thoughts and beliefs of the author who produce it. Documents were used to understand the synthesizing operations of a psychological kind. They were seen as the language of a voice which is no longer present, thus document is just the way to reach that voice. The linguistic data of statements acts as an object to revive the inner life of constituting subjects in this case. Foucault's archeology on the contrary treats statements as objects of study in their own right, without paying any attention to what was the author's thought. For him, statements need to be treated as monuments. Thus he seeks to do away with the constituent subject<sup>5</sup>.

Foucault says that archeology's concern lies in paying attention to discursive formation or positivity that makes possible the existence of disciplines and sciences, further explaining the changes in the discursive formation by looking at the relations of thought and discourse to the factors that lie outside them. He says that it is the episteme of the epoch that archeology seeks to reveal and it defines the conditions of possibility of all forms of knowledge.

### **Discursive Formation, Archeology and Thresholds**

Discursive formations may be mapped by scientific disciplines, but they go way beyond the boundaries of any scientific disciplines, and these discursive formations that archeology seeks to describe. These all diverse and dispersed elements need to figure in the genealogy of modern biology and not just natural history which is linked only to the theory of signs and to the project of a science of order. The autonomy and rigid enclosure of natural history excludes the elements which can legitimately contribute to the constitution of biology.

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault, 1977: 117.

The same can be said about other established sciences of classical period. It is also true that positivities and sciences do not always exist in an exclusive relation and that there is always the possibility of a science where there is a positivity. This raises the question of the relation between the positivities and the sciences. This puzzle can be sorted out by drawing the distinction between what Foucault calls *savoir* and *connaissance*.

Here we see Foucault's formulation of dynamic conception of knowledge. He calls epistemic knowledge *savoir*<sup>6</sup> and scientific knowledge or accumulated, refined, deepened, adjusted knowledge *connaissance*. The elements of a scientific discourse are made available by the *savoir* of a discursive formation. It is *savoir* that provides critical knowledge. Foucault sees objects which the discourses talks about as emerging in the space offered by *savoir*. It is in this space the subject speaks of the objects of his discourse. Thus the occurrence of discursive formations and the objects made possible by it is coeval. There is no one permanent, delimited object to refer to. This underpins the nominalist streak in Foucault's archeological approach.

Foucault says that *connaissance* remains in the clutches of subjectivity or *connaissance* is the subjective enterprise. So subject plays the key role in achieving the scientific knowledge and for this subject depends on *savoir*. On the other hand, it is *savoir* that concerns archeology, so archeology explores the discursive practice/knowledge (*savoir*)/science axis. Foucault suggests that we should distinguish between scientific domains and archeological territories. Those texts or propositions that do not meet the accepted norms of the period are not seen as belonging to the scientific domain.

Literary and philosophical texts are excluded from any domain of scientificity as they do not observe the established scientific norms of the period. But an archeological territory extends not only to scientific texts but also to literary and philosophical texts that do not observe to a great deal the scientific norms of the period.

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault, 1969/2002: 200.

Foucault says that it is possible to isolate four distinct stages or thresholds that a discursive formation crosses. Threshold of positivity and threshold of epistemologization come prior to the threshold of scientificity and threshold of formalization. The first threshold is crossed by a discursive practice when it becomes an individual and autonomous system and start operating to govern the formation of statements. The second stage is reached when a group of statements is formed following the epistemic norms of verification and coherence through which to verify knowledge. The threshold of scientificity is crossed when the statements of the epistemological figure comply with archeological rules and certain laws.

Different thresholds and the attention to the threshold of interest make it possible to do different types of historical analysis. This kind of history of science was practiced by G. Bachelard and G. Canguilhem, when they dealt only with *connaissance* or took only the current scientific disciplines and accepted these fully constituted sciences as the norm of its historical analysis to write the history of how the concepts and standards of these sciences developed freeing itself from pre-scientific stuffs.

But the archeological history which Foucault practices does not accept norms of fully constituted sciences in an uncritical way and subject them to archeological analysis, which shows that their emergence is rooted in contingent historical processes and archeological or epistemological structures. The presence of the set of relations among different discursive practices is possible because this set of discursive practices is tethered to common non-discursive domains and its practices which make possible the occurrence of different discursive practices at a given period.

Foucault says that scientific norms originate at the interaction point of discursive practices and non-discursive systems, which has the effect of removing the role of subject in the formation of norms by showing that norms originate beyond the domain of subjectivity. The norms, which govern the formation of discourses, are essentially attached to the social practices with shows the nature of our engagement with the word. So the practical

engagement of human with their world at a given period of time serves as the basis for the emergence of the norms of the sciences.

The norms of the sciences played a very critical role in the functioning of modern society. Medical discourse performed specific social functions as individuals were judged and categorized according to its scientific definitions. Administrative and judicial decision making took recourse to it and so it helped in running prisons. Scientific discourses now came to be used in disciplining individuals and thus in the exercise of power.

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