
Critiques of Development using Foucault's Discourse and Power Theory

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Abstract

Analyzing the modern development program through Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power provides insights into its origins and shortcomings. This research aims to critique modern development theory in terms of Foucault's theory of discourse and power. Development, and modern development theory as well as Escobar's articles about the implementation of Foucault's theory were studied. The research found that the discourse surrounding development serves as a means of exerting power and control, often driven by the interests of dominant nations. However, despite ambitious promises, development programs frequently fail to achieve meaningful progress due to the power dynamics and inequalities embedded in the modern development discourse which excludes local discourse. Applying Foucault's framework challenges universal claims and grand narratives, opening avenues for critical analysis and a post-modern understanding of development. This approach prompts a reevaluation of power dynamics, knowledge production, and discursive practices, aiming for context-specific approaches that address the diverse needs of underdeveloped nations.

Keywords: Discourse, power, knowledge, development, Foucault

Introduction

A sophisticated synthesis of historical, historiographical, and cultural studies with ties to Michel Foucault's work is where the concept of discourse originates (Miller, 1990). Foucauldian discourse is a linguistic function, or the carefully considered, well-thought-out collection of statements made by authorities and supported by verification processes, which designates it as "true" (Gutting, 1994). Within the context of knowledge production, these statements resonate with the notion of

epistemes, highlighting the dynamic interplay between historical conditions and the validation of formalized knowledge systems (Foucault, 1994). As knowledge or episteme is seen to be a function of power relationships, 'discourse' is wholly determined by the power relationship (Miller, 1990). Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1978).

Two centers of power i.e., two centers of truth, emerged following the end of the Second World War. Both Western centers, which promoted two different theories of development, have persisted in serving as discursive spaces and spreading the discourse of modernity around the world. Discourses have crystallized in a strategy for dealing with the problems of "underdevelopment" (Escobar, 1984). The discourse of modernization, which aims to solve underdevelopment is based on a grand arch-tectonic meta-narrative implicitly aimed at universalizing Western institutions and implementing the phased and homogenizing development model.

Even though there was only one center left after 1990, the development era did not result in a process of catching up for the majority of the "developing world," but rather in a gap between rich and poor countries (Brigg, 2002). Discourses regarding the evolutionary development of developing nations, produced by Western nations are now understood as a means of imposing Western disciplinary and normalizing systems and dominance over them. Development is deployed in ways that assist greatly in sustaining dominance and economic exploitation of the developing world by the developed world. If the developing world wants to pursue a new kind of development, the discourse itself needs to be altered (Escobar, 1984).

Method

This research is a critique of modern development theory using Foucauldian theory, research has to be done by collecting adequate books, journals, and articles. Foucault ideas about Discourse, power, and knowledge are distributed in his many books, articles, class notes, and

interviews. This research is highly influenced by the work done by Escobar. His two major works, "*Discourse and Power in Development: Michel Foucault and the Relevance of His Work to the Third World*" (Escobar, 1984) and "*Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*" (Escobar, 2001) were used as a primary reference to understand how to use Foucault's theory to critique post-modernism because Escobar worked with Foucault in UC Berkeley and know for coining the term 'discourse of development'.

To comprehend Foucault's theory, an exploration of key texts such as "The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences" (Foucault, 1970), "The History of Sexuality" (Foucault, 1978), "The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language" (Foucault, 1972), "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison" (Foucault, 1979), and "The Cambridge Companion to Foucault" (Gutting, 1994) was conducted. Additionally, in investigating modern development, Habermas's work "The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures" (Habermas, 2015) was consulted, and for insights into development and post-development, Pieterse's "Development Theory: Deconstructions/Reconstructions" (Pieterse, 2010) was referenced. Various other relevant books and articles were also utilized to supplement the research, with the majority of these resources sourced from JSTOR and the TU central library.

The fundamental unit of the discourse of power is understood in terms of force relation and resistance as derived from *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language* (Foucault, 1972). Research has not included power as described by Foucault in his other book *The Genealogy of Power and Knowledge* which deals with sovereignty as a unit of power. The relationship between power and development discourse is explained and discussed.

This research likes to sketch out the discourse and power relationship to post-modernism, a response to the following questions: How do we relate, the critique of modernization provided by Foucault as well as his insights

into the workings of discourse and power with the unfulfilled aspiration of development of the developing World?

Discussion and Analysis

Foucauldian Discourse

The theory of discourse is a relatively new field of study, but it has already had a significant impact on the human and social sciences. Claude Lévi-Strauss, an anthropologist, was the first to introduce the French word "*discourse*" into the social sciences. In his book *Structural Anthropology* (Levi-Strauss, 2008), he used this word to refer to the way that language is used to create meaning in social and cultural contexts. His work on discourse was influential in the development of structuralism and post-structuralism. However, it was Michel Foucault who became internationally famous for his use of discourse as the central concept of his ambitious theoretical program.

Foucault has helped us to understand the role of language in shaping our understanding of the world. He has provided us with new tools for analyzing and understanding social issues. Michel Foucault systematically formulated his historical discourse analysis in the book "The Archaeology of Knowledge." Within this text, he extended the application of the discourse concept to what he termed the episteme. Each historical epoch, from the Renaissance to the modern Age of Man, possesses a distinct episteme, a governing framework shaping its knowledge and classification systems (Foucault, 1972). Foucault used episteme to re-explain the history of Western thought from about 1500 to the present.

Foucault's concept of episteme can be likened to other philosophical concepts in the history of philosophy, such as Hegel's 'Geist', Thomas Kuhn's 'paradigms', and Marx and Rostow's 'phases' (Foucault, 1972). Nevertheless, Foucault's episteme differs from these other concepts in two significant ways. Firstly, Foucault's episteme is not grounded in a Hegelian dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Secondly, episteme exhibits discontinuity, implying that it does not undergo a gradual evolution from

one stage to another. Instead, Foucault contends that epistemes are characterized by abrupt changes, shifting abruptly from one stage to another.

Moving beyond historical epistemes, Foucault situated discourse within the social realm, highlighting its intricate relationships with concrete economic, technological, political, and administrative activities. This shift in focus deepened the understanding of discourse as a product and producer of its social context. He argued that discourse does not generate reality; instead, discursive knowledge is generated to serve the expanding social power that progressively infiltrates contemporary institutions, including prisons, armies, schools, and factories (Strydom, 2000).

Regardless of context whether it's historical episteme or social practices, Discourses claimed the status of truth to gain power. People often accept discourses as true based on the faith they have in the underlying knowledge system (episteme) to distinguish truth from falsehood. However, such trust relies on assumptions about the episteme's infallibility, which may not always be justified (Gutting,1994). It's crucial to recognize that such "truths" are socially constructed and may not universally reflect reality. Foucault (1994) also argued that an episteme defines the prevailing framework of a historical period, dictating the criteria by which formalized knowledge systems are deemed valid. Thus, Foucault is seen as being concerned with the analysis of power developed from the underlying constructive system (episteme) and historical development.

Power

The comprehension of power within the realm of sociological inquiry is facilitated through the lens of two distinct models: the action theoretical model and the system theoretical model, as delineated by Honneth (1993). In the action theoretical paradigm, power is conceived as a product of a continual and dynamic process involving strategic actions undertaken by social actors with conflicting goals. This perspective, as articulated by Foucault (1978, 1979), underscores the genesis of power through the

ongoing interplay of strategic actions, wherein social actors engage in conflicts over the realization of their divergent objectives.

Conversely, the prevalence of the system theoretical model, as advanced by Foucault (1978), directs attention to the intricate web of relations characterized by "strategic power" emanating from conflictual action situations. Within this theoretical framework, the focus shifts from individual actors and their strategic engagements to the systemic and structural aspects of power dynamics. The systems theoretical perspective elucidates how power operates within broader societal structures, shedding light on the interconnectedness of power relations and their manifestation in complex social systems.

In the pursuit of understanding power dynamics, these models offer valuable conceptual tools. The action theoretical model illuminates micro-level interactions, emphasizing the agency of individual actors, while the system theoretical model provides a macro-level perspective, unveiling the systemic underpinnings of power dynamics within society. This dual approach enriches the power discourse, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of the multifaceted nature of power in social contexts.

Knowledge (epistemes)

In discourse theory, alongside the concept of power, 'knowledge' is another pivotal notion. Miller (1990) interprets Foucault's knowledge as an intricate relationship with power within discourse theory. Initially, he views knowledge, or episteme, as a pre-established and organized system of "claims" and "statements" imposed upon individuals. However, unlike traditional notions of absolute truth, these claims are neither inherently true nor false but rather shaped by the inherent power dynamics within a specific group or context. This leads to Foucault's famous assertion: "Every point in the exercise of power is a site where knowledge is formed" (Miller, 1990). Conversely, once established, this "knowledge" or episteme becomes instrumental in reinforcing and perpetuating the very power dynamics that produced it.

While drawing parallels to Althusserian thought, where everything is viewed as ideological, discourse theory takes this notion further by positing power as an inherent and constitutive element of everything (Miller, 1990). This all-encompassing view, however, raises concerns about the explanatory power of the concept itself. If everything is power, according to this perspective, then power loses its specific meaning and analytical utility. Miller highlights this potential shortcoming: "This comprehensive and all-encompassing view diminishes the explanatory efficacy of the concept of power, as, according to this perspective, nothing exists outside the realm of power" (1990).

Foucault (1970) incorporates socio-cultural systems of knowledge into the domain of power, illustrating the complex interconnection between power and knowledge and their impact on the systems itself. He argues that, on the one hand, established power structures create and shape certain knowledge systems to serve their own needs. Yet, on the other hand, these very knowledge systems can exert influence on those same power structures, leading to a dynamic and complex relationship i.e. 'discourse'. However, Foucault (1972, 1978) emphasizes that the way we conceptualize power shapes how we understand discourse. If we view society primarily as a web of power relations, as he did, then knowledge constructions within that society are seen as tools to reinforce power. This perspective becomes central to understanding discourse. Foucault further emphasizes the inseparability of discourse and power. He argues that all knowledge articulated in discourse is deeply entangled with the social world's everyday conflicts, broader struggles, and institutional strategies. In other words, power shapes knowledge, and knowledge shapes power, in a continuous and dynamic process.

Western perspectives often misinterpret power as a top-down force wielded by the powerful over the powerless, focusing primarily on negative aspects like control and repression. This narrow view, influenced by thinkers like Hobbes, Leviathan, and Gramsci, stems from a legalistic mindset and overshadows the true complexity of power (Morris & Patton, 1979). Foucault challenges this view, arguing that power is not solely about

domination or negative control. It permeates all social interactions, even positive ones, operating in subtle ways that shape knowledge, identities, and behaviors. A more expansive comprehension of power requires transcending conventional ideas associating it with state control or class struggles (Morris & Patton, 1979). This prompts a pivotal question: if power is not synonymous with domination or repression, what does it entail? This inquiry encourages the exploration of alternative theories and concepts, fostering a deeper understanding of the diverse nature of power that goes beyond the traditional misconceptions prevalent in Western thought.

In 1976, in his work "Will to Knowledge," Foucault delineates power as immanent, portraying it not as a concrete or tangible force but as a real and measurable force in the world, akin to gravity or magnetism (Foucault, 1978). Foucault consistently draws parallels with the hard sciences in his power theory, frequently alluding to the micro-physics of power. Similar to gravity's role in the physical realm, power is posited as a fundamental element in the social sphere. In contrast to Nietzsche, Foucault avoids crafting a metaphysical conception of power and instead underscores an intentional and non-subjective metaphor, illustrating how power manifests in institutions such as asylums and the prison system (Foucault, 1978).

Resistance

Resistance is an integral and inherent component of power dynamics. According to Foucault (1978) in the presence of power, resistance inevitably emerges. The conventional notion of revolutionaries and rebels positioning themselves in opposition to the power structure implies an external resistance. But, in Foucault's perspective, resistance is an internal and fundamental element not the external within the dynamics of power. He contends that if resistance is absent, power ceases to exist. Intriguingly intertwined with this concept is the notion of 'freedom'. Foucault asserts that relations of power only exist when subjects possess freedom. (Foucault, 1978) explains further "The inherent relations of power permeate every social sphere due to the existence of freedom itself". This

discourse leads us to a central aspect of power dynamics known as force relations.

Force relations

Force relations serve as the fundamental units within Foucault's bottom-up power system. Foucault (1978) articulates the units by stating, "It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate". To illustrate, consider legal force relations within a family and society, or between individuals and their parents or spouses. These force relations aggregate to give rise to micro tactics, exemplified by the force relations among parents, friends, teachers, and others. The interactions among these individuals contribute to a chain or system, emphasizing the interconnected nature of these force relations Foucault (1978).

Force relations exert influence not on an individual but on each other. Confrontations between these force relations can result in transformation, strengthening, or reversal. However, their interactions extend beyond mere struggle; force relations can also mutually support and amalgamate, forming interconnected chains or systems. These chains and systems of force relations give rise to what Foucault (1978) terms 'the strategies,' wherein these force relations collectively take effect.

The strategies

Foucault's exploration of power shifts from force relations at the micro level to strategies at the macro-cultural level. The trajectory of power's evolution unfolds from force relations to micro tactics and ultimately to macro strategies. Strategies operate on a macroscopic level, encompassing entire nations and the global stage, with their fundamental designs and institutional manifestations found in state apparatuses, legal formulations, and various societal hegemonies (Foucault, 1978).

Some examples like Greta Thunberg's campaign, starting from her school and extending to the global stage, exemplify this growth. Notable historical events like the American Revolution, French Revolution, and Bolshevik

Revolution showcase how discontent and resistance at a small scale can evolve into interconnected force relations, eventually leading to the overthrow of governments or significant legal and societal transformations. Foucault (1979) emphasizes this perpetual battle in his work "Discipline and Punish," portraying the power model as an ongoing struggle rather than a contractual agreement or territorial conquest.

At the strategic level, a larger amalgamation of shared force relations takes place. Over time, these strategic alliances intensify and coalesce into what Foucault terms "institutional crystallization." These chains and systems of force relations solidify into institutions, which can manifest as legal frameworks such as civil law, human rights acts, and international agreements like the Paris Climate Agreement (2016). Global initiatives like MDGs, SDGs, and development plans also exemplify the institutionalization of strategic force relations.

Hence, initiatives spearheaded by the West, such as liberalization, modernization, socialist programs, and globally coordinated efforts like the UN's MDGs and SDGs, can be perceived as the institutional crystallization of strategies arising from the intrinsic relationship between Western episteme and the discourse on power.

Some Critics of the findings

Foucault's critique of grand narratives is a ruthless attack on everything that has come before, including the achievements of the development era. His ideas have been labeled anti-humanist, as he takes Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" to its extreme. However, we cannot completely ignore the continuity and phase models of development, which have been effective in many parts of the world. Foucault and Escobar also ignored the Asian miracle of development, which shows that even the most underdeveloped countries can achieve significant progress. While we should not blindly accept grand narratives, we also cannot ignore the real-world needs of people who lack access to healthcare, food, and security.

Michel Foucault's fundamental framework of the relationship of discourse, power, and knowledge when applied to critique Eurocentric structural thought, an alternative emphasis on the "Discourse of development" origins in the "context of cultures and framed within power relations" called post-modernist/development thought (Pieterse, 2010).

The concept of post-development arose in response to the Eurocentric Hegemonic Development Theory, which frequently holds that the trajectory of development in Western Europe is the norm or logical course for all developing world. Post-development scholars including Escobar argue that critiques of traditional development theory (including dependency theory and Marxism) are still grounded in European experience and thus fail to offer a sufficiently radical re-imagination of what development could or should look like elsewhere in the world (Escobar, 1984).

Conclusion

Underdevelopment, in its historical context, can be traced back to a process of Westernization that has evolved over several centuries. The most recent phase, which began around 1945, is characterized by an extensive and unprecedented strategy. Under modernization and development, a complete Western apparatus assumed responsibility for managing the lives of developing nations. Development, at times, gained such significance for developing countries that it justified subjecting their populations to extensive interventions, more potent manifestations of power, and systems of control.

It was significant enough to lead developing nations to perceive themselves as "inferior," "underdeveloped," and "ignorant," causing them to question the worth of their own cultures and embrace reason and faith. Ultimately, the pursuit of such "development" overshadowed the realization of its unattainable promises. This process is marked by both movements of penetration and resistance. However, the objection should not be directed solely at Western strategies. Instead, observing the entire phenomenon in

terms of the Foucauldian apparatus of the discourse and power, helps us to understand the specific rationalities associated with modern development theory and underdeveloped countries, in the forms of power and knowledge that explain the association, and ultimately, how it can be altered.

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