

# *Foucault's Study of Power Theory*

## *-- A Textual Study Based on Discipline and Punishment*

Hangning Liu<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Shanxi University, Wucheng Street, Taiyuan, China*

*a. Liuhangning1@163.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** As the *basic* concept of political philosophy, power has the nature of absolutely dominating social operation. For a long time, political science and sociology have examined how it operates from a top-down perspective. With the development of grand narrative and the rise of structuralism, the theory of power also needs to be further updated to conform to the trend of postmodernism. Through his research on the development of prisons and other institutions, Foucault realized that the operation law of power was not inseparable from political governance as explained by traditional philosophy, but integrated into the lives of all people in an atomic way. In the modern era, the art of domination incorporates this microphysics and develops it into a technology that, unlike the oppressive domination of antiquity, interferes with People's Daily lives in a way that is controlled by the body. The key to this technology is discipline, which operates in institutions that alienate time and space, and also separate man's utility from his capacity to develop, making him part of the social machine. Foucault's micro-power theory may seem very different from the theory of right and Marxism, but it is used in the context of a contractual society, and its purpose is economic, without disconnection. Through micro-power, we can have a clearer understanding of modern state governance under capitalism.

**Keywords:** Foucault, Power, Knowledge, Body

### 1. Introduction

In the study of contemporary political philosophy, Michel Foucault's micro power theory is one of the trends leading the postmodern power theory. In his book *Discipline and Punishment*, Foucault systematically explains how power manifests itself in every corner of society, and how the individual is shaped through various subtle mechanisms.

Hobbes was the first to give meaning to power, but no other modern philosophers has approached politics from the perspective of power. In modern times, since philosophy is no longer concerned with the macro structure, power has become the best way for thinkers to study political logic. Therefore, they have given precise definitions of different aspects of power, such as Weber's view of power as the realization of the will, and Russell's view of power as a psychological desire. There is no doubt that power has become a hot spot in modern political philosophy, and many power models have emerged.

Foucault's power model is the most radical among them. This model thoroughly puts power into

the micro perspective and enriches the research breadth of political philosophy. First of all, in Foucault's view, power does not have the nature of the so-called "power center". In the view of traditional political philosophy, power is often a tool of rule and administration, which is a singular power. However, in Foucault's argument, the concept of power should be a plural form, and also have multiple power relations. This allows power to permeate all aspects like capillaries. In addition, the traditional political view has placed the discussion of power into the macro political concepts of class, revolution and general will, which makes the mistake of "state-centered theory". "Foucault pointed out that the political technology of modernity has become increasingly widespread and widely permeated every field of social life such as economy, education, health care, and family. That is to say, the control and domination of society by modern political technology has become omnipresent, forming a new 'panopticism'." [1] Human life is dominated by micro-power and becomes a controllable body.

## 2. Power and discourse

### 2.1. Shift of power perspective

The biggest feature of the macro view of power is that power is regarded as being possessed by a certain party. The tradition of treating power as property originates from Locke, who defined power as: "Political power is the right to make laws for the purpose of defining and protecting property, the right to impose the death penalty and all lesser punishments, and the right to use the power of the community to enforce these laws and to defend the state against foreign aggression." [2] Locke does not say what the nature of rights is, but rather makes a connection between power and rights. This leads later generations to focus on the question of power around ruling power.

Foucault criticizes the traditional "analysis mode of right". In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault defined power as "the diversity of power relations, inherent in the field in which they operate, constituting organization. Their unceasing struggle and collision with each other alters, enhances or subverts them. These relations of forces support each other and form chains or systems, or, on the contrary, separate distinctions and contradictions." [3] In Foucault's description, power does not belong to any ruling class, governing body, or individual, and is not a property but a universal presence in society as a network of relationships. Moreover, this kind of relationship is not unidirectional and static, and power exists for a long time as long as people are in the relationship. Because of his extensive studies on prison, clinical trials, sex, etc., Foucault included power into details, and since then, the perspective of Western political philosophy began to change from a bottom-up perspective.

The guarantee of the smooth operation of power is the mechanism of punishment, so Foucault made a lot of research on prisons. In feudal times, the government often tortured prisoners physically by means of severe punishment and humiliation. After the Enlightenment, the punishment tended to be humane, but behind it was the tightening control of the prisoner's "soul". In Foucault's context, the soul is different from the Christian "soul", but the inner spirit, including thoughts, mental states, values and so on. "Behind this relaxation of punishment, one can find a displacement of the point of application of punishment, and through this displacement one can see the emergence of a new field of objects, a new system of facts and truths, and a large number of unknown roles of the will in criminal justice. A whole body of knowledge, technology, and 'scientific' discourse has come into being and become entangled with the practice of punishing power." [4] The knowledge of punishment changed from mere trial to pedagogy, psychology, psychiatry, and jurisprudence working together to make a comprehensive judgment of the prisoner's "soul."

In this shift in punishment, Foucault sees the movement of power toward discourse, in line with the power he had previously detected in *Madness and Civilization* and *The Birth of Clinical Medicine*. This is the starting point for Foucault to carry out a scalpel-like comprehensive analysis of power.

## 2.2. Microphysics of power

Power is explained in prisons and courtrooms as "soul" control, and when applied to all aspects of society, this discursive view of power is called power technology. Unlike most of the thinkers who followed the Enlightenment line of the past, who bound knowledge and freedom to truth, Foucault saw knowledge as inextricably linked to the repressive and restrictive sphere of power. Foucault would have us acknowledge that "power produces knowledge (and not only does power encourage knowledge because it serves it, nor does power use knowledge because it is useful); Power and knowledge are directly related to each other; There can be no power relations without the corresponding construction of a field of knowledge, and no knowledge without the simultaneous presupposition and construction of power relations." [4] In Foucault, knowledge symbolizing reason is no longer a weapon against oppression, but an important means for micro power to carry out.

The reason why knowledge becomes a carrier is that in Foucault's context, power is no longer a macroscopic state machine, but atomized and integrated into all aspects of society. Foucault believed that as long as one party wants to dominate the other and the other party has the intention of resisting, then there is a power relationship, and such a relationship is dialectical, and both sides will produce corresponding power relations. Therefore, power is not an interest group's oppression of other groups and individuals from a macro perspective, but belongs to a power network and penetrates into life like capillaries. Social contradictions are not concentrated as in the French Revolution. They erupt at the nodes of the network and appear in the form of small problems.

As much as the humanization of punishment, the modern state has moved to the micro, from violence to discipline that relies on knowledge. Through the means of discipline, the members of the society will consciously integrate into the role that the society wants them to be shaped in the discipline, and gain the recognition of the outside world. The exercise of such power no longer resembles medieval deterrence, but becomes a technique. By power technology, we mean "a series of means, techniques, procedures, layers of application, and objectives." It is a kind of 'physics' or 'anatomy' of power, a kind of technology." [4] Where old deterrence sought to control the physical body, the technology of power sought to control the political sense of identity. "We focused on the 'body politic' as a set of material factors and technologies that serve as weapons, Repeaters, communication pathways and means of support for power and knowledge relations that intervene and conquer the human body by turning it into an object of knowledge." [4] Moving from the guillotine to everyday knowledge, the control of power becomes as sophisticated as it becomes less perceptible. Moreover, because power is not proprietary, its use is as much strategic as technical. The description of this strategy is influenced by the structuralist method, and it is also closely related to Foucault's thought based on "discourse". We can see that Foucault's use of power in his works is very different from that of previous political thinkers. He often uses military discourse to describe power. The network features of power make the analysis of its trend more like a comprehensive plan on a military map, with attention to all the details at all times.

Before the post-modern wave, the interpretation of power by Marx's view of history was the most advanced achievement in political philosophy. Foucault's power technique continued Marx's modern political critical spirit to a certain extent, and examined power in a practical and materialistic way after leaving the history of ideas. But different from Marx's complete and thorough criticism of modernity politics, from the macro whole to the micro part, Foucault pays more attention to the form of power operation. In addition to Marxism, pragmatism since Dewey has also become a trend. Foucault's power techniques also differ from the scientific methods of sociology and political science in that they merely observe phenomena and make statistics, but do not explore the internal logic of these actions.

### 3. Techniques and places of power

#### 3.1. Power and the tame body

The 18th and 19th centuries saw the rapid rise of Prussia and the unification of Germany as a continental hegemon. Unlike Britain's economic ascent and France's institutional exploration, Prussia's powerful feature highlighted the military reform, of which the implementation of compulsory military system played a fundamental role. In ancient times, the investment in the training and equipment of individual soldiers was often high, which required that the conscription must find the right candidate. But as productivity improved, these costs fell and the role of the soldier as a pawn increased, allowing a more flexible form of conscription to enter the history books. Foucault noted the differences between the modern military system and the past, but he traced it back to Frederick II: "Frederick II, the shrewd and powerful king, was very interested in them, in small machines, well-trained legions, and long drills." [4] He regulated his troops with iron discipline, a coercive way of forcing all parts of the human body to behave appropriately and thus conform to line tactics. Later, the compulsory military system developed this discipline, you can see that discipline is no longer the only way, glory, mission and other spiritual traction also become the means of control, making this technology complete. The good soldier is no longer a product of innate conditions, but a product that can be created by training.

Today, it is not just the soldier who is controlled as a disciplined body. Modern life is full of discipline and demands. In the 18th century, with the development of economy, there were many trade chambers of commerce. These chambers had various rules for members, which provided room for discipline and development. The form of chamber of commerce makes the discipline mainly affect the small group of people, and makes the members more economical, so that they can become efficient and well-trained through the training of mentors and apprentices. Until now, individuation and economization have been the two main characteristics of discipline. With the development of The Times, the supervision technology in the discipline is also maturing, so that the control of individual time, place and behavior track is gradually strengthened, and the individual body is more and more effectively controlled with the development of science and technology.

This kind of modern discipline is different from all kinds of control in ancient times. Slavery's physical control of the slave depended on personal relationships and physical torture, but the modern sense of the individual is born a citizen, and physical torture, as mentioned above, is no longer a means of punishment mechanism, and the modern sense of discipline is more about inner obedience and psychological approval. Catholic asceticism also regulated the details of the individual, and enacted a variety of laws to maintain discipline, even as God commanded that these processes be carried out with an inner consent. Here, however, it is important to note that Catholicism is not dealing with individuals who are machines, but with God's people. The distant purpose of Catholic abstinence is to distance people from worldly desires and utility and thus gain God's approval. Modern discipline "is not aimed at increasing the skill of the human body, nor at strengthening its subjugation, but at establishing a relation which, by the mechanism itself, makes the human body more obedient as it becomes more useful, or more useful as it becomes obedient." It emphasizes practicality and makes man fit for capitalist mass production. Therefore, obedience and practicality are the two main goals of discipline technology.

The modern society has a variety of disciplinary institutions, such as hospitals, schools, factories, etc., where different identities are constantly being created to meet the needs of society. At the same time, the establishment of disciplinary institutions has promoted the better play of disciplinary functions. Like the police station, it not only plays a role in maintaining social order, but also restricts individual behaviors through a large number of reports and records. In addition, the moral function of discipline can not be ignored. "In the governance of power, morality is the foundation of its actions, it

is the reason for the legitimacy of power, and it is also the premise of the corresponding governance logic. The discipline society points to a crime free society. An undifferentiated and utopian social form, Foucault's view of power also shows his emphasis on moral issues due to the morality of the logic of disciplining power operation." [5] It is because of the intervention of morality that discipline is logical, and it is also because of the intervention of morality that the universal penetration of discipline is reasonable.

### 3.2. Techniques of discipline

Philosophers of the Enlightenment advocated the mechanistic theory and labeled man as a machine. For example, Lattre declared that man is a machine, and as a machine man can undoubtedly be manipulated, used and improved. After the Enlightenment, the will of God gradually receded, bringing more and more a series of knowledge, technology, science to expand the application. From these minutiae, man is also manipulated by these reasons to become man in the modern sense. Man in the modern sense is constantly controlled by discipline and has the following four characteristics.

First of all, people are active in a divided space. The individual must be enclosed in airtight Spaces, such as barracks, schools, factories, etc., and these enclosed Spaces are also divided into smaller and smaller Spaces. But such enclosures are not absolute, but bind useful people to efficient Spaces. "Its purpose is to identify those present and those absent, to know where and how to place people, to establish useful connections, to interrupt others, in order to monitor each person's performance at every moment, to give assessments and rulings, to count its nature and merits." [4] Space also serves as a functional place, which not only facilitates the supervision of individuals, but also makes the people in the functional space more efficient because of the division of labor. Among them, there is also a kind of hierarchy, and the layout of the space has a kind of order, such as the allocation of seats in the classroom according to the performance of good or bad.

Time planning has a constraining effect on human behavior. Timetables were invented by the Monastic order as a way to keep members in check. But rather than die out with the decline of Catholic abstinence, the invention was picked up by the governing classes and used in all aspects of society. They organized time mathematically, giving it a kind of spatial geometry. Such a rule gives the individual a time-work discipline, and ADAPTS to it by following it day by day. People began to see time in terms of moments. At the same time as the mind solidifies, the human body also moves in precise forms, making appropriate behaviors at different times. Such a time discipline makes one's behavior efficient and punctual.

Discipline provides a comprehensive plan for man's creation. The individual is placed on a path of personal development. This development has a progressive character, with time divided into different segments, such as primary school, junior high school, and university, which will eventually end and are usually linked in a way that allows assessment managers to screen and categorize individuals hierarchically. At the end of the classification, each individual acquires an identity that makes the exercises match his identity. For the planning of creation, let people continue to develop in useful aspects, so that the economic division of labor is constantly optimized.

The discipline arranges the strength of man. Discrete individuals, through the arrangement of discipline, are organized together and become more productive. In the military, a line of fire is far more lethal than an individual shooting at random. In the case of production, orderly arrangement also increases efficiency. The sum of the labor force of the workers in a large group of divisions is greater than the sum of the individual labor force. If society were a large machine, it too would require a fine combination of forces. In it, the individual body, by discipline, becomes part of the social machine, and time also plays a disciplining role. Discipline, as a great operator, forms a set of fine commands that make the body more easily tamed.

The bourgeoisie claimed that through reform or revolution, it had liberated the body bound to the

hierarchy under the autocracy of the old system and obtained the freedom of human rights. Foucault, on the other hand, believed that the spirit was not free. People were always under surveillance and supervision, and their cognition and living habits were conditioned to conform to the patterns of production machines. For Foucault, there is no doubt that modern society is a panoptical society. "The panoptical sphere is the whole lower sphere. It is the realm of the various jagged bodies, with their various details, their diverse movements, their diverse forces, their spatial relations." [4] The technique of discipline is the inner workings of panopticism, which keeps people's minds focused on assembly-line economic life and unaware of such prison-like social formations.

#### 4. Conclusion

Foucault is different from the legal model and Marx's political model since the Enlightenment. He reveals the third mechanism of power operation. His special way of studying power makes his power theory avoid abstract speculation to a certain extent, and has realistic vividness, and does not limit the perspective to economy. Indeed, it is easy to understand Foucault's disciplining power because it is constantly in operation, shaping the lives of individuals in such a way that today we all live in Foucault's model. Today, the modern state has developed the technology of power into a strategy. People are trapped in patterns of spatial orientation, structuring of activities, and driven creativity, in an apparent warlessness. "The apparent absence of war is the greatest political war waged by the bourgeoisie. In this war without the smoke of gunpowder, it is man himself, in his disciplined existence, who is really annihilated." [6] In this war, the free individual advocated by the Enlightenment, so to speak, disappears.

Now, with the development of information technology, new forms of discipline are emerging, penetrating every aspect of people's lives in a more nuanced way, perfecting the scope of panoramic surveillance. With the impetus of The Times, Foucault's theory has proved its correctness more and more.

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