

# ***Research on the Theory of Power in Foucault's Mid-term Thoughts***

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**Abstract:** The concept of power is deeply rooted in everyday life, making it difficult to escape the dominant status assigned by the world. The issue of power is central to Foucault's field of study, where he innovatively proposed a productive view of power and explored its internal relationship with knowledge and subjectivity from a micro-power perspective. On one hand, Foucault posits that the subject is a product of power and primarily analyzes three ways in which power produces subjects, introducing the theory of the "death of the subject" in modernity. On the other hand, Foucault elucidates the relationship between power and knowledge, asserting that power produces knowledge, but it must also rely on the creation of discourse for its implementation and circulation. This paper then focuses on Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, analyzing how the technologies of discipline in the operation of modern micro-power tame the bodies of modern subjects, thereby forming a disciplinary society. The model of power over the body shifts from the harsh penal practices of the classical period to modern disciplinary training. Foucault's theory of power marks an important turning point in the history of Western philosophy, and his theory of biopolitics provides an innovative understanding of the concept of "power" from macro to micro levels.

**Keywords:** Foucault, Power, Discourse.

## **1. Introduction**

Foucault is a representative figure in contemporary French philosophy and social theory. He does not have a fixed area of study and transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries by proposing a completely new micro-theory of power through his research on the governance of reason, clinical medicine, prison systems, and issues of sexuality. As an inheritor of modernist thought, Nietzsche, and postmodernism, Foucault himself is rebellious. He possesses a spirit of radical skepticism and resistance, maintaining a cautious attitude toward existing theories. It is this character that drives him to deconstruct established rules using a "subversive" approach, presenting distinctive new theories. He is unwilling to confine his thoughts, which is why Foucault's research directions continuously change throughout his life, shifting from early archaeological studies to mid-term genealogical research, and finally to late explorations of the ethics of biopolitics. The one constant, however, is that the issue of power remains central to Foucault's theories. His articulation of power is novel; he argues for the relationships among power, discourse, subjectivity, and knowledge, profoundly shaking the foundations of traditional views on power.

Marx represents the traditional view of power. It can be said that Foucault spent his life in struggle with Marxist thought, transitioning from a complete break with Marxism to a strategic alliance. Marx's view of power is traditional, oppressive, and macro-level. He critiqued political power in capitalism, asserting that power is oppressive within political law and delving deeply into the economic realm. This presents the oppressive dimension of power, which controls people through violence and ideology.

In contrast, Foucault's view of power has three distinctive features. First, Foucault believes that power has no center, which is also referred to as the "capillary nature of power." He argues that power is plural, not concentrated in a central point or group, but rather spreads throughout society like capillaries. Power is decentralized, without a center, existing in every corner and layer of society. Unlike Marx, who focuses more on the macro phenomena of power operating within governments, political parties, states, and even capitalism, Foucault emphasizes the study of marginalized groups or micro-political phenomena traditionally overlooked, such as the mentally ill, students, soldiers, prisoners, women, children, and issues of sexuality. For Foucault, power operates within social disciplinary organizations such as mental hospitals, hospitals, schools, military barracks, and families. Second, Foucault argues that power is not owned by anyone. His particular interest lies in the ways these power relations are organized, the forms they take, and the techniques they rely on, rather than focusing on the final outcome of who ends up holding power [1]. Third, regarding the operation of power, Foucault discusses micro, productive power that exercises control and influence over individuals' bodies to achieve discipline. He thus believes that violence and ideology are not the characteristics of power. Here, Foucault emphasizes the relationship between discipline and power, proposing that disciplinary power targets the body, aiming to produce more obedient and useful bodies through physical training.

He outlines three means of disciplinary power: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination [2]. Additionally, Foucault's view of power primarily addresses the relationships between power, subjectivity, knowledge, and discourse. He argues that the essence of micro power is productive, permeating and intervening in individuals' bodies and lives. In summary, from a postmodernist standpoint, Foucault inherits and develops modernist and Nietzschean thought, reconstructing the traditional macro-theory of power in the West using new archaeological and genealogical methods, thereby constructing a micro theory of power that liberates people's thoughts [3].

## 2. Power and Discourse

### 2.1. Power and Subjectivity

The general concept of the subject is constructed in Descartes' "Cogito, ergo sum," experiencing a journey of birth and demise. Foucault inherits Nietzsche's genealogy and applies it to the micro-analysis of Western social history. Building on his critique of subject philosophy, he further argues that "humanity" becomes both subject and object simultaneously within truth, power, and individual action. As a Nietzschean, Foucault inherits and transcends his philosophical thought. The will to power is central to Nietzsche's ideas; he views truth as a series of rules related to power, positing that knowledge is a manifestation of the will to power, introducing meanings and values into philosophy while highlighting the fictiveness of the subject [4]. Foucault continues this line of thought, critiquing metaphysical conceptions of the subject and nihilism, and further proposes the theory of "knowledge-power-discourse."

From a nihilistic perspective, the world is divided into two parts: the real world and the world of ideals. Nietzsche argues that this phenomenon first arose with Socrates, passing through Plato and Christianity to modern philosophers like Descartes and Kant, where metaphysical subjectivity has

dominated thought [1]. It was not until Nietzsche's questioning that metaphysical subjectivity was challenged. He sharply declared that "God is dead," pointing out that modern people have killed God with their disbelief in myth. Through the theory of the will to power, Nietzsche inverted metaphysical subjectivity, urging people to acknowledge change as real existence and proposing the concept of the *Übermensch*. After Nietzsche, Foucault also took on the responsibility of announcing the death of the subject. He proclaimed the "death of man" through his theory of power, arguing that the subject is merely a product constructed by power. Foucault identified three types of knowledge, asserting that humans are products constructed by modern Western philosophy, and as modern types of knowledge deconstruct, so too will humanity fade away. In summary, Foucault consistently follows Nietzsche in critiquing metaphysical subjectivity and nihilism while pursuing the diversity of subjects produced by power [1].

The concept of the subject has undergone a process of birth and demise since the nineteenth century. The "human" that Foucault speaks of is not a biological entity but an abstracted subject. He believes that the subject emerged only after the nineteenth century, becoming the foundation and center of modern knowledge. Scholars have differing views on the markers of the subject's birth. Foucault identifies Kant's philosophy as the marker of the subject's emergence, while we generally consider Descartes as the pioneer of modern philosophy. In the era of Cartesian philosophy, the assertion "Cogito, ergo sum" divided entities into soul and body, marking the emergence of the subject-object dichotomy; this idea of subjectivity can be traced back to that time, though it did not yet become the core of the knowledge domain. In fact, the birth of the subject traverses both classical and modern periods, undergoing a developmental process [5]. In conclusion, Descartes laid the foundation for metaphysical subjectivity in his argument for "thinking" and "being." Subsequently, Kant advanced the development of metaphysical subjectivity and established the form of this thought. By demonstrating the binary opposition between "things-in-themselves" and "phenomena," as well as "reason" and "non-reason," he indicated that the empirical self places knowledge objects at the center. Subject philosophy was thus truly established, its core distinguishing between the metaphysical and the physical world, positing that the former is superior to the latter, declaring the self-evidence of thought as the foundation of all sciences and knowledge.

Finally, Nietzsche's and Foucault's critiques of metaphysical subjectivity witness the demise of traditional subjectivity. Foucault employs genealogical and archaeological methods to critique subject philosophy, further exploring how modern subjects are constructed within historical contexts and power operations. He primarily argues how "we" simultaneously become subjects and objects within the realms of knowledge, power, and morality. He points out: first, through truth, we construct ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, through the domain of power, we construct ourselves as subjects capable of action toward others; third, concerning our ethical historical ontology, through ethics, we construct ourselves as moral agents [4].

Foucault critiques the self-evidence of thought within metaphysical subjectivity, emphasizing that subjects in modern society are constructed through a set of discursive mechanisms. Thus, subjects are in fact disciplined by modern power and have become tools of contemporary political domination.

## 2.2. Power and Knowledge

Foucault posits that when the body becomes involved in the political realm, it can only become a useful force when it possesses both productive capacity and is subject to discipline. He believes that this state of conquest can be achieved through knowledge and this "control," together forming the "political technology of the body," also known as microphysics. In Foucault's view of power: first, the power exerted on the body is not owned by anyone; it can only be mobilized and operated. Second, power propagates as it is enacted. In other words, power is not fixed in the relationship between the state and citizens but is dispersed throughout society like capillaries. Finally, micro-power is

multifaceted, not univocal, and is characterized by multiple unstable centers. There exists a series of subtle relationships between power and knowledge. As Foucault states: it is this science, “a particular mode of conquest, that creates a subject of knowledge with a certain ‘scientific status’” [6].

Foucault’s understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power can be traced back to Nietzsche’s concept of the will to power. For Nietzsche, the will to power is the axis of his philosophy, with truth or knowledge arising from this will. He argues that needs and desires drive individuals in their pursuit of truth and knowledge, and these needs and desires constitute the will to power. Each person can understand truth from their own perspective, leading to the conclusion that there is no absolute truth—only interpretations, not facts [1]. Foucault inherits Nietzsche’s fundamental ideas, endorsing the view that power is productive. He ultimately concludes that power not only produces subjects but also generates knowledge. Foucault views discourse as the site of power struggles, where intellectuals exercise and disseminate power through modes of discourse production. While discourse systems reinforce power, they also provide the potential to undermine it. Knowledge comprises different discourse systems; it is not derived from a single discipline but arises alongside power mechanisms. All knowledge exists within power relations and transforms into power under specific conditions; therefore, knowledge shrouded in particular power relations cannot possess neutrality or purity. Conversely, knowledge can be distinguished as legitimate or illegitimate in relation to specific power relations [3]. The relationship between power and knowledge is not merely one of dominance; the key lies in understanding that power does not merely control or repress knowledge; rather, they are mutually implicative. Knowledge emerges within power relations and is expressed through discourse. At the same time, scientific knowledge, through the processes of generating, recording, accumulating, circulating, and operating within the power-discourse system, allows power relations to arise, become established, and be consolidated within social relations.

Foucault argues that we should discard traditional notions that assert “power drives people to madness, and thus rejecting power is a condition for acquiring knowledge.” On the contrary, knowledge and power are interlinked; knowledge produces power, and without presupposing power relations, knowledge cannot exist. Likewise, without corresponding construction of a field of knowledge, power relations cannot exist. It is the contradictory struggle between power and knowledge that shapes the forms and domains of knowledge [6]. Under the overarching theme of subjectification, the issues of truth, power, and personal behavior are Foucault’s three main research problems. Throughout his life, Foucault dedicated himself to studying the three modes that transform individuals into objects, exploring “how we become subjects and objects of knowledge, power, and morality” [4].

### **3. The Operation of Micro-Power**

#### **3.1. The Techniques of Discipline**

In Foucault’s view, discipline is essentially a “physics” of micro-power. He argues that all social phenomena can be explained from the perspective of power. Before the latter half of the twentieth century, Descartes’ mechanical theory provided support for micro-control in society. It was Foucault who fully revealed the essence of power in his thoughts on micro-power, emphasizing the dynamics of power itself and its influence on behavior.

Starting in the late eighteenth century, humanitarian progress drove a transformation in penal techniques—less cruelty and suffering, more compassion and respect [6]. Public physical torture disappeared, and punishment aimed to control people’s souls by restricting their freedom of movement and personal allocation of time. Foucault believes that as capitalism developed, the bourgeoisie was not content with exercising macro-control through constitutional and legal means; instead, they created a tighter set of techniques to exert control over every aspect of individuals on a

micro level. Power no longer manifested itself through violence and torture; the subject of power was no longer limited to the vast state apparatus but instead permeated the mutual governance between individuals, infiltrating various networks within society. Foucault also notes that micro-power operates not only ideologically but had already been functioning on individuals' bodies through specific channels. This political technology concerning the body "imposes postures, attitudes, uses, spatial distributions, and modes of habitation on the body, implementing a physical and spatial distribution. The struggles individuals engage in concerning their bodies are political struggles" [7]. This political technology extracts maximum productivity and labor time from the bodies of working individuals.

The four techniques of disciplinary power differ significantly from the macro perspective in terms of their scope of control, objects of discipline, and modes of regulation. When a continuous, ubiquitous top-down surveillance system makes disciplinary power omnipresent; when detailed standards create normative pressures for assimilation, turning disciplined individuals into supporters of disciplinary power; and when meticulous checks ensure the form of power, forcing individuals into objectification, a new technique of power is born, leading to the emergence of a disciplinary society [8].

The first way is spatial segmentation. At this time, society does not view the human body as an indivisible whole but rather as something that can be divided into units. In the mechanism of spatial unit allocation, individuals must be enclosed and confined within a closed space, giving rise to various political and administrative spaces, such as hospitals, schools, and factories. These spaces are surrounded by high walls to facilitate the restriction and supervision of individuals placed within them. Additionally, power encompasses hierarchies, thus spatializing power, with these units organized according to a hierarchy. The second way is control of activities. The fundamental method is to create an elaborate timetable that is precise to every moment, minute, or even second, arranging individuals' free time so that every ounce of their physical energy is thoroughly calculated and utilized. Our bodies are thus called upon to act in specific ways through this disciplinary technique, shaping our postures and establishing work rhythms to achieve efficiency and punctuality. The third way is planning for individual development. Following the control mechanism, there comes a re-segmentation, re-planning, and re-evaluation of time. Time is divided into continuous segments, each ending with an assessment that serves as a node; after ranking, each person's role and practice will align with their position in the hierarchy. Individuals are placed within a predetermined path, allowing their development to be more controllable and efficient. The last way is dynamic planning. From a holistic perspective, each individual is viewed as a part of a machine, combined in an effective and productive manner to achieve effective power arrangement and establish a complete command system [9].

From the soul to the body, from the internal to the external, from the material to the spiritual, power achieves discipline over individuals through various spaces. Individuals are monitored, examined, and normalized, ensnared in deeper modern power, and micro-power has become ubiquitous.

### 3.2. Power and the Body

Power produces subjects, but the modes of production targeting the body vary across different historical periods. Under the system of monarchical power, the body primarily faced harsh punishment, whereas in the modern power system, the focus is mainly on discipline [10].

In the classical period, the strategy of power regarding the body involved physical punishment. The public executioner's tools—red-hot iron tongs, boiling wax, iron, and sulfur—inflicted open torture on the body. Methods such as dismemberment, branding, and public display became



techniques through which power could strictly control the body. At this time, the focal point of punishment lay in physical pain.

In the modern period, humanitarian ideas emerging from the Enlightenment compelled society to reject power strategies that were often more bloody and violent than the crimes themselves, leading to a reconfiguration of the penal system. The daily schedule for juvenile offenders meticulously outlined every aspect of their lives, including meals, labor, and study, while the former executioner became the warden of the juvenile facility. After the Industrial Revolution, a logic centered on economic efficiency required time to be highly segmented, compelling the body to engage in focused, precise, and efficient modes of operation. The factory life of capitalism in the 17th to 19th centuries transplanted the finely controlled lifestyles from monasteries under church supervision into factory management, where a disciplined body became a prerequisite for efficiency [11]. Certainly, compared to the earlier physical punishments, modern power discipline has relaxed its control over the body. However, measures such as personal confinement and forced labor still strip subjects of their bodily freedom, imposing restrictions on the body. In fact, past punishments have transformed from a technique of inflicting bodily pain to a mechanism of temporarily depriving individuals of economic rights. The focus of power has shifted from the tortured body to a body disciplined by rules.

Interventions of power on the body are continuous, even within the modern power system. After the transformation of modern power techniques, interventions on the body shifted from inflicting physical pain to mechanisms that deprive individuals of bodily rights. While the sensation of physical pain may have disappeared, the deprivation of rights persists. Even as strategies targeting the body are humanized, the status of the body as an object has not changed. In this context, a comprehensive set of knowledge, techniques, and scientific discourse regarding the body has formed and increasingly intertwined with the exercise of power [10]. The body is reinforced within the power system, yet simultaneously subjected to further domination.

#### 4. Conclusion

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, there has been a persistent opposition between the body and consciousness. From Plato to Descartes and Kant, philosophers have prioritized consciousness while undervaluing the body, resulting in the marginalization of the body within Western theory. As a neo-Nietzschean, Foucault introduced the concept of biopolitics, emphasizing the importance of the body. He argued that the body is involved in the realm of modern political studies, where micro-power and disciplinary institutions operate through the body to achieve the management and regulation of individuals. Consequently, Foucault referred to his theories as “the political technology of the body” and “the micro-physics of power.”

In questioning power, we are also inquiring into what allows us to be governed and what enables us to govern [12]. What is “power”? Foucault provided his answer, presenting his theory of biopolitics as a new understanding of modern concepts of power. On one hand, he introduced the new perspective of productive power. Traditionally, power has been viewed as macro and oppressive, particularly in Marxist theory. In contrast, Foucault’s perspective highlights micro, productive power that operates within institutions such as hospitals, schools, and prisons, disciplining individuals by acting on their bodies. For Foucault, power is not merely about oppression and exploitation; rather, it seeks to normalize, generate, and adjust forces, possessing a power that enables life. On the other hand, Foucault initiated the exploration of spatial politics. His theories of space are closely linked to his concept of biopolitics. He was deeply concerned with how power operates, and the power that acts upon bodies and lives must necessarily function within specific spaces. Questions such as “How to determine the fixed position of prisoners to strengthen management?” and “How to arrange workers’ spaces to enhance work efficiency?” became new fields of research for him. Foucault posited that all

members of society are subjected to spatial discipline [1]. His notion of productive micro-power connects biopolitics with spatial politics, critiquing and transcending previous theories of power.

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