

FOUCAULT AND A FEMINIST THEORY OF DIFFERENCE

The question of difference, of the diversity of women's experience, as well as the diversity of different forms of domination at play in contemporary society, has raised theoretical as well as practical and strategic questions within the women's movement and across the increasingly pluralist and coalition oriented american left. As the voices of women of color are finally to some extent being heard within the predominantly white women's movement, the idea of a single "woman's voice" which expresses the authentic experience of being "woman" has been challenged. Similarly, the strategy, which is currently popular on the left of large coalition oriented actions, such as the recent April 25th Mobilization and the ongoing work of the Rainbow Coalition, has raised difficult theoretical questions for activists. With most analyses of patriarchy or capitalism for example, the theoretical framework which enables the explanation of one of these phenomena ends up being unable to explain the others, or having to deform it to make it fit into the paradigm as a secondary aspect. This tendency of theorizing has in part led to a hostility toward theory on the part of many advocates of coalition politics, since it tends toward a need to hierarchize issues. Lack of theoretical reflection has often, however led to practical problems of what are to count as potential coalition partners, and what is the basis of the unity of those invited to join.

The work of Michel Foucault has been taken up by several feminist theorists attempting to deal with these issues of difference. Foucault's work has been suggestive because his concept of power shifts focus from the narrowly defined realm of political power to the forms of power which operate in everyday interactions and in the

construction of the self, thus making more visible some operations of power which tend to be overlooked and which have been significant in the oppression of women. Also, whereas most theories of domination tend to focus on a single operation of power and to ontologize it, Foucault argues that Power exists in diverse and conflicting discourses whose interrelations are historically contingent. Unfortunately, however, much of the way that Foucault is used in answering these questions of difference avoids the problem of what is to count as progressive or liberating and resorts to appeals to common sense. Chris Wheedon's recent and popular book, Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory is a good example of this reading of Foucault. Wheedon argues that Foucault's poststructuralism can be useful to feminist practice since it avoids many of the weaknesses implicit in other theoretical approaches.

From the historical detail of his studies of the penal system and of sexuality, Foucault argues that power eludes the total control of any one centralizing body such as the state...This type of analysis expands the field of potential political activity in ways which are extremely important for feminism, avoiding as it does, the reductionism of single-cause analyses...His method involves starting not from some general theory of meaning and power, which will inevitably relate it to a universal signifier such as the phallus in psychoanalysis or the capital-labour relationship in Marxism, but from the local centers of power/knowledge...[1]

In her conclusion, arguing for the political

1. Notes available on request (with SASE) from subject.

relevance of Foucault for feminist practice, she says,

The question is what modes of subjectivity are open to us and what they imply in political terms. Modes of subjectivity, like theories of society or versions of history, are temporary fixings in the ongoing process in which any absolute meaning or truth is constantly deferred. The important point is to recognize the political implications of particular ways of fixing meaning [2].

The problem with this reading of Foucault is that it assumes that we can know the political implications of a given discourse unproblematically. Wheedon joins Foucault in rejecting Marxist, classical liberal and psychoanalytic theories. Yet these theories have in differing ways been the foundations of many of the notions of the political which inform most people concerned with feminist practice. So, in light of Foucault's criticism of these approaches, ideas about the political implications of various strategies need to be reassessed.

If we go this extra step and reject common sense approaches, then in order to bring out the political implications of Foucault, and to keep from falling into the abyss of relativism, from which no social critique is possible, we need to push our reading of Foucault a step further than Wheedon does. Although Foucault's social theory is clearly a pluralist one, and this accounts for its value for a theory of difference, this pluralism is limited. Foucault's concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony are the basis for the distinction between acceptable and problematic true discourses. What we end up with is not a theory which allows us to deduce this distinction a priori, rather, we are given a general criterion: concrete analysis of the specific operations of power in a given discourse, how it

functions and how it relates to other discourses must be ascertained through empirical analysis.

Foucault claims that one of the primary ways that power operates in our society is through the construction of "true discourses" or regimes of truth. From Nietzsche, Foucault gets the idea that knowledge and truth do not exist independently of power. Reality is infinitely complex and can be conceptualized in an infinite number of ways. What is to become solidified as a common conception of reality is based on the power of a given discourse to gain hegemony over social reality. Thus, what exists as truth is fundamentally linked to the operation of power [3]. Foucault claims that the drive for modern men and women to know themselves, put forward by christian theology and psychoanalysis, furthers the internalization into the body of regimes of power.

Because of their reference to an individual with a pre-socially given amount of desire, Foucault charges thinkers such as Marcuse with playing into the hands of a dominant discourse. In Eros and Civilization, Marcuse puts forth the thesis that social liberation is to be achieved through a freeing of the libido from surplus repression [4]. This thesis is based on a conceptualization of the individual body as having a pre-socially given amount of sexual desire. Some of this desire must be repressed in order for society to function, the rest of it must be allowed free expression. When this surplus repression is lifted, the individual is said to be free. For Marcuse, society constrains the instinctual structure of the individual, but this structure is based on a human essence which exists outside of the complex of social forces.

Foucault claims that this theory is misleading because power, "produces effects at the level of desire--and also the level of knowledge, far from preventing knowledge, power produces it" [5]. The problem with Marcuse and with many marxist

approaches, according to Foucault, is that they have "always presupposed a human subject on the lines of the model produced by classical philosophy, endowed with consciousness which power is then to seize on" [6]. In contrast to classical theories of power which take power to be something applied in a repressive way against an individual, Foucault proposes a concept of power which can account for the construction of the individual. Foucault's alternative notion of bio-power differs from the traditionally recognized juridical form in three basic ways: (1) Power is exercised rather than possessed, (2) power is not primarily repressive, but productive, and, (3) power is analysed as coming from the bottom up [7]. While we are threatened with sanctions as sovereign individuals by a state that wields a form of top-down repressive power, we are also and perhaps more significantly constructed as individuals with certain desires and sense of self through exercises of bio-power.

In Discipline and Punish Foucault shows how, with the birth of the modern prison, the state changed its methods of social control [8]. Instead of only holding negative sanctions over the body--through the threats to death, torture or various forms of deprivation--the new form of social control worked positively--through operations such as psychological reform and observation--to construct the individual through an internalization into the subject of various regimes of truth. For Foucault, it is not the case that individuals are simply repressed by society, but that they are constituted, inscribed with desire and repressed. Foucault claims that individual desires, wills, and interests are created through social practices, because of this, we must be cautious in referring to the individual as the basis of social critique.

Much of what Foucault has to say seems to imply that a critical theory is both impossible

and undesirable. According to Foucault, power operates through the construction of discourses which gain hegemony over those who operate with them. This has led many readers of Foucault to argue that any political program is inherently oppressive, since programs necessarily imply a search for something like the true or the good. This search results in the internalization into the individual of a regime of power. People who read Foucault this way have tended to argue for a politics of radical individualism. A problem with this is that a position which argues that all discourses are inherently oppressive has either implicated itself, since it is also a prescription--namely one against involving oneself in a universal discourse--or it must be able to posit a realm outside of discourses, which would tend to lead us back to something like a "true inner self."

An alternative to this is to view that Foucault was aware of the aporia involved in advocating any specific type of activity as an escape from the power of discourses and therefore avoided making any sort of value claims. This reading is the basis of the claim that Foucault was a positivist. That is, he merely analyses operations of power; value judgments are external to this analysis. The weakness of this view is that it ignores the fact that for Foucault, knowledge can never be "value free"--all knowledge, including Foucault's own theorizing, is always in the interest of a discourse. Adoption of Foucault's theory, like adoption of any theory, according to Foucault, implies an internalization of a regime of power. However we intend to construe a Foucauldian politics, Foucault's own conception of power and his epistemology, imply that all actions are inextricably caught up in a web of power. There is no outside to power. In order to articulate a Foucauldian politics, then, it seems that we must be able to distinguish

between more and less acceptable operations of power.

While Foucault himself was very cautious not to articulate a critical theory, there is very clearly a moral tone to his work, and its contours seems compatible with the kinds of political activity with which he was himself engaged. Although Foucault criticizes the idea of the self as the locus of freedom, he argues strongly for the right of individuals to speak their own cases. An example of this was his work in getting prisoners a voice in prison reform [9]. Foucault is in the paradoxical position of denying the autonomous existence of the self, while at the same time arguing for a form of self-determination.

When speaking of the kinds of political practices which he views as positive, Foucault repeatedly refers to the need for us to gain control of the ways in which we are constructed as individuals. What he sees as positive in the women's movement and in some other contemporary liberation movements is that they "are not exactly for or against the 'individual' but rather that they are struggles against the government of individualization" [10]. The individual cannot gain control over the process of individualization in the name of 'herself' since the self is an artifact of the very discourses which she is trying to break down. She can, however, do it in the name of the body. For Foucault, although the body does not have a fixed structure of needs and desires, it can still serve as "locus of the dissociated self" [11]. Like Nietzsche's, Foucault's social critique requires a validation of the health of the individual as an external principle of justice. To accept Foucault's concept of hegemony as the basis of social critique, we must agree that the body has rights both to self-determination and to life.

It is not that we have a true inner self which must be liberated, but rather, that one of the primary ways that global strategies operate in our society is through the generation of regimes of truth about the self. Through gaining control over the process of individuation, we break the hegemony of these larger strategies. One aspect of political strategy, then, must be to gain control of the current systems for the production of truth, of "detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social economic and cultural, with which it operates at the present time" [12].

Foucault's framework would encourage studies which focus on discourses which break down social hegemony. To be counter-hegemonic, a discourse must reappropriate the categories given by the dominant discourses according to the self-conception of those grouped under these categories. An example of this is the feminist appropriation of the category "woman." Because this category has been historically imposed upon women rather than created by them, it has operated to enforce control over women. With the growth of the various phases of the women's movement, this category has been appropriated and changed. Through the leverage gained through the transformation of this category, women have been able to re-interpret their places within the social order and put forth ideological as well as material demands.

In this sense the appropriation of the category "woman" by women has been counter-hegemonic. To the extent, however, that this category was appropriated by white women, it must be seen as playing into the hegemony of the discourse of racism. Only when women of color are able to have an equal voice in defining what "woman" is will this hegemonic aspect of the category be negated. A discourse is only

counter-hegemonic to the extent that those operating with it have the ability to transform it. Social movements and conceptual frameworks play differently into different discourses. They are not in themselves liberating or oppressive, hegemonic or counter-hegemonic.

Foucault offers us an epistemological framework through which power and its relation to knowledge can be analysed. Because his theory of power can account for the construction of the subjects of power relations, can explain the multiplicity of the operations of power, and can yield an understanding of the way that different regimes of power can work together or in conflict, Foucault's framework can be appropriated for use in feminist projects. His methodological principles allow for a multiplicity of causal relations to be seen in a particular subject matter. While this yields a form of pluralism, the principle of local control yields a principle of justice which keeps it from falling into relativism. If this principle of justice is accepted, then the fact that Foucault's theory does not yield universal principles should be seen as a strength, rather than a weakness.

If we agree with Foucault that self-determination is important, then we should only ask of a theory that it clarify our epistemological situations; our specific analyses must grow out of our own situated concerns. No one is situated so as to enable an independent critique of society. A certain level of pluralism is needed to enable the diversity of different experiences to speak. This is not to say that everything that oppressed people say is "true," but that by allowing a diversity of voices to speak, the truth that emerges will more likely be a counter-hegemonic one than if we quietly accept the "truths" created by those who have traditionally had the power to speak.