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MICHEL FOUCAULT

Michel Foucault is one of the most widely cited twentieth-century theorists in educational research. His most important contribution to this field has been in providing the resources for a sustained critique of the educational endeavor. Due to the scope of his work – which extends well beyond educational matters – and the radical consequences of his critical perspective, Foucault's ideas are typically difficult to apply. To fully appreciate the insights Foucault has to offer, it is important to situate this work within his wider critique of the present.

Tone and Scope

Discipline and Punish, one of Foucault's most famous books, contains a statement that indicates the tone and scope of his critical venture: With the rise of modernity *the soul became the prison of the body*. This modern soul has no vital or inextinguishable essence, *but it is no illusion either*. Unlike the soul of Christian theology, it was not born in sin, but was born from methods of punishment, supervision and constraint. It was a material product created through multiple techniques, extending across sites including the newly developed institutions of mass education.

The consequence of this claim is to make freedom – a political project based on securing and protecting individual selves from the effects of dominant power – inherently problematic. For Foucault, the modern men, women and children that nineteenth-century campaigners, politicians and bureaucrats would seek to free, were already conditioned by forces much greater than themselves as the instruments of a wider political economy. Their souls, made from the resources of the institutions that had schooled them were already limited constructs, devised to suit the needs of government in the form of responsible and docile subjects. This, Foucault argues, is the dark underside of Western modernity, which through its commitments to liberalism and democracy would secure education and votes for all. Those newly established liberties were underwritten by multiple techniques that would instruct citizens to use their freedoms 'appropriately'.

These are monumental claims. Many other similarly iconoclastic statements may be found in Foucault's work, which ranges from histories of madness, medicine and prisons, to the workings of power, knowledge, government and subjectivity. Foucault was, nevertheless, a meticulous and canny thinker, careful to avoid grand theories and epic claims. He preferred to look from the 'bottom up', believing that work that appears to view its subjects from above, or even from the outside, is impossible. This led him at times to appear non-committal, unwilling to declare his political and philosophical allegiances. Foucault's work is often doggedly and sometimes frustratingly attendant to a form of meticulous unpicking, making it difficult to work out what Foucault was seeking to achieve in political terms. Whilst his political commitments were strong – indeed Foucault was no stranger to protest, direct action, arrest, deportation and even police brutality – Foucault has been criticized for refusing to declare what exactly he was arguing for, or what values guided his work.

The reason for these refusals was Foucault's suspicion of those very values, and what they were based upon. In particular, he suspected that the human subject, in whose interests ethical systems are often justified, is always a local construction. There is no universal human subject of history in whose name

we could speak. Foucault was able to show that many features of contemporary life are locally contingent, especially those features that we most take for granted. They have histories and thus, in principle at least, are open to change. Grander illusions, such as the presumed freedoms that modern education helped establish, are broken apart according to their histories. These 'genealogies', as Foucault called them, often muddy the origins of our most cherished ideals by situating these ideals within the banal transformations of everyday conduct from which they emerged. Here, and in many other respects, Foucault aligned himself with the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche who argued that morality itself is just another social construct. The history of morality, like any other history, is marked by its grubby becomings. Moral meanings change through unexpected reversals; there is no internal or developmental consistency to the history of morality. Often the agent of change is trivial in appearance, to be located in some minor adjustment or other that has taken place in personal or social conduct. For Foucault, histories are seldom grand or progressive; they are grey and turbid.

Power and Confession

In educational research, Foucault's work on power has been particularly influential. Here great care must be taken to avoid misunderstanding. Foucault emphasized the productivity of power, its generative potential. He was careful to avoid a repressive hypothesis where in education one might identify techniques as 'bad' because they appear to limit the freedom of the student. Highly mechanistic devices such as examinations or tests, are frequently placed in this category. It is tempting to identify the most severe of these as devices that trample the interior of the child, and therefore conclude that they have no place in an educational context. Foucault's counter-claim (which will outrage most educational pieties) is to suggest that these techniques may be central to the educational endeavor.

Educational techniques such as those developed by nineteenth century schools (the first institutions of mass schooling), were able to shape individuality in such a way that those concerned were isolated from one another but open to the influence of government. Practices of division and exclusion (where the student is divided within, or divided from others) were combined with techniques that would enable the individual to turn him- or herself into a subject, techniques that would enable one to recognize externally defined traits within the self and then act upon them. As a material reality, the modern soul constructed here depends on a terrain of concepts within which it can be determined. It relies on external categories ranging from more general ideas – psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness etc. – to more child-specific notions – the troubled child, the child of promise, the borderline child, the resilient child and so on. The child's interior, in other words, was the product of external ideas and systems for locating those ideas within the self which, in turn, influenced how that self was formed. Foucault's aim was to identify the material practices through which this occurred.

In educational contexts, these material practices can be very intimate. Relations between teachers and students are sometimes close, where the latter are encouraged to confide in the former. Foucault explored these relations under the general rubric of 'pastoral power', focusing in particular on confessional practices, where students may be encouraged to reveal and explore their inner thoughts and feelings. This might occur during periods of pastoral care, or through a whole-class task as basic as a reflective diary, where students are asked to explore the events of a weekend just gone by. Foucault argued that the obligation to confess, to reflect openly on one's inner being, has become so deeply ingrained that we no longer see it as the effect of a power that constrains us. It seems as though the 'truth' that is lodged within only needs to surface, and that if it fails to do so, some sort of constraint,

or inhibition, is to blame for holding it in place and weighing it down. It is presumed, in other words, that confession frees, whilst 'power' forces one to remain silent. This, Foucault suggested, is the 'ruse of confession'. His point was to argue that power functions in the opposite direction, instructing individuals to produce truths about themselves, and rendering silence awkward. In educational contexts, students must learn to reflect upon their 'inner' selves using approved techniques and categories. The cumulative effect of observations like these is to suspect that educational relationships are never innocent; they are built from synthetic devices that have carefully fabricated effects. One might well associate some of the techniques described here with those favoured by progressive education, thus raising the suspicion that no pedagogy is purely benign, that no pedagogy can claim to be above the stratagems of power. From this perspective and taken as a whole, education becomes nothing less than a great artifice. Little that is 'natural' or too banal to be without consequence remains.

Theory and Strategy

Foucault was a subversive thinker who set about challenging conventions. It is often assumed, for example, that knowledge arrives once power departs. If power remains, so the argument goes, its effects may contaminate knowledge. Foucault sought to show how the two are intimately linked: The human sciences were born from observations, and these required human samples. Social groups such as the newly gathered children of the nineteenth century mass school, formed ideal test subjects. They were already in the required form of measurable samples, having been temporarily held captive by the school. For the last two centuries at least, as children and then as adults, we have been examined at multiple sites. This has led to an overall inversion of visibility thanks to which previously ignored, unknown and marginalized groups as well as more general but minor phenomena, have been brought to prominence. The production of knowledge once prioritized the powered elite whose biographies were the only ones worth telling. Now the minor historical actors, their traits and biographies, have been opened up to inspection. Either directly visible through forms of optical surveillance or indirectly visible by means of the data trail that is left when passing through various agencies and institutions, the individual is captured within an array of documents, and becomes accessible thereby to the influence of power.

From this perspective, power cannot corrupt knowledge because knowledge is already the product of power and is tied up within its operations. The overall effect is to deny exemption to any form of knowledge, or any science that claims the right to truth. Everything becomes subject to a form of skeptical, meticulous inquiry. The assumption here, which takes the form of a basic strategic-analytic choice, is to presume that everything is dangerous, since power is everywhere. This basic critical stance encourages the educational theorist to engage in a radical critique, targeting in particular those aspects of the educational endeavor that are seen as natural, or unproblematic, and have as a result been allowed to remain unchallenged.

According to its dispersal, power is never entirely located in powerful institutions. It is never totally possessed as if it could be accumulated and concentrated, as if it could be brought to one place so as to be absent elsewhere. Equally, it would be a mistake to assume that power is governed by a single organizing principle, and to argue that an instance of power represents the wider interests of capital, patriarchy or the state. These are displacements, Foucault argues, by which we evade the real question of power in all its complex detail.

The difficulty with this position is that it implies the impossibility of denouncing power from the outside, simply because power is everywhere. Here Foucault adopted the stance of a hyperactive pessimist, suggesting that critique is at its most productive when it remains alert, avoiding the temptation (and potential satisfaction) of standing back to offer a global analysis, and then condemn. Foucault suspected that each global analysis only perpetuates an illusion of truth. These illusory truths can, moreover, have damaging effects. He claimed that revolutionary action that is based upon a single global diagnosis of power will almost inevitably reinvest some of the power-mechanisms that are to be overthrown. Here Foucault was particularly critical of revolutionary activities guided by a Marxist analysis of state power, and claimed, moreover, that socialist states reproduced in different guises the cruelties and inequities they sought to destroy. Radical, emancipatory theory had failed to anticipate these outcomes because of its tendency to reduce the complexities of power to simplistic relations of domination and exploitation.

Against what Foucault saw as this tendency to neglect subtlety and ambiguity in the analysis of power, Foucault argued for a profusion of grey, meticulous and patiently constructed enquires into the multiple effects and modes of functioning that power takes. By implication, educational researchers who seek to adopt Foucault's theoretical framework, are challenged to avoid passing judgment in their critique, which would be based on a normative ideal of the purpose of education. This anti-normative injunction will presumably enable researchers to interrogate educational concerns with greater caution and more critical insight.

It is worth remembering, however, that Foucault's invitation to exercise caution in analysis was not symptomatic of his preference for academic reserve. Rather, Foucault believed that a transformation in analytic techniques of the sort he promoted should be accompanied by experiments involving new forms of political conduct to which the insights gained through critique could be related. His was a radical project, sensitizing actors to the multiple effects of power and exploring the contingencies of government and subjectivity. Foucault promoted a form of intellectual labor that was never to be separated or abstracted from political praxis.

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SEE ALSO: liberalism; Nietzsche, Friedrich; neoliberalism; postmodernism.

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