

FOUCAULT'S CRITIQUE OF MARX'S CONCEPTION OF POWER

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Abstract

In this paper I will explore Foucault's critique of Marx's concept of power. For Marx, power stems from economic relations. That is why Marx considers the bourgeois class as the source of power. Additionally and necessarily he views power as exploitative. Under these circumstances the only viable way turns out, to Marx, is to capture the power centers by bloody revolution. Once the bourgeois class bleeds out power will become soft and the society would be free. I argue that Marx's concept of power is defective, fallacious, obsolete and dangerous. In contrast to Marx I will try to demonstrate that Foucault's view of the same is relatively mature, practical and useful for a balanced and fuller understanding of modern society. Marx's exposition of power is challenged on account of its poor methodology, weak empirical foundation, lack of relevance to the modern society and uselessness. Because of these reasons I conclude that transforming modern society under the influence of Marx's thought might be dangerous.

Keywords: Marx's Conception of Power; Disciplinary Power; Foucault's Critique of Marxism

Introduction

What good is an armed revolution if the capture of state apparatus might not end injustice, exploitation and inequality? Does the capture of political state help to resolve human crisis?

This question brought me to explore two rival traditions in Western philosophy: Marxist and Postmodernist. The Marxist school of thought is very confident that the take-over of political apparatus, at least, provides a substantial ground to end exploitation and injustice whereas the postmodernist is very skeptical about the efficacy of this idea.

Difference among them stems from what they think about the idea of "power". The rival notions of "power" are the underlying cause of optimism and pessimism about state capture.

Apart from this theoretical debate, we know, there have been the governments of the left (the party of movement) and right (the party of order) in Europe. These governments have even failed to live up the promises they made to the people. In the real world the people still face unemployment, issues concerning health care, mortgage, credit card payments, insurance, and education. The state apparatus has been in the hands of liberal and socialist, yet no results of which the political governments have even promised.

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Keeping the real world into mind postmodernists are closer to truth. They are not very hopeful about getting results by capturing state, yet Marxists still look optimistic. This paper takes the side of postmodernist, especially it brings Foucault's argument into light. And, due to the remit of the paper I would not discuss the flaws inherent in Foucault's argument.

For this purpose the present paper is divided into two parts. In the first part I would draw Marx's conception of power upon his models of social change. In the second part Foucault's exposition and refutation of the Marxist view of power is developed. Foucault criticizes Marx on methodological, empirical and pragmatic grounds.

Marx's Concept of Power

Indeed, Marx has puzzled us by giving various models of historical evolution. At times history is shown to be driven by alienation (Marx, 2012) or relations of production (Marx & Engels, 1965), other times by technological determinism (Marx, 1867) or class struggle (Marx & Engels, 2002). All these various models of historical change, no matter how distinct they are, share a number of points that would guide us to explore Marx's view of power (Marx, Engels, & Smelser, 1973, pp. 3-6). First, all models consider historical change in terms of material or economic transformation. No significant change can be brought about without changing the economic structure. Additionally, all models view economic structure as the *foundation* of human society. Human society—of which there are multiple facets such as politics, religion, culture, media etc.—is predominantly based upon and governed by the considerations of economic interests. The notion of foundation or *base* existing in the form of economic structure cannot be conceived without presupposing some form of soft or hard determinism (Marx & Simon, 1994, p. xxii). That is to say, economic structure enjoys some form of independence in comparison to the political, social and religious structures of the same society, which Marx calls 'historical materialism' (Bottomore, 1973, p. 69). Consequently political and social frameworks do not turn out to be the centers of power. Instead, power lies at the center of economic structures whose considerations are deeply permeated in political and social institutions.

In all models of social change the relations of productions necessarily offer differential control to the agents of production. The relations of production intrinsically constitute the phenomenon of oppression and oppressor in which some individuals who hold the means of production live upon what is produced by the other (Robinson & Kelley, 1979, pp. 39-40). For Marx, the conflict, therefore, seems to be an intrinsic attribute of economic structure (Coser, 1967, p. 49).

In these conditions power seems to be, for Marx, a capability of the class to "extract" or to "avoid" surplus labor (Miller, 1984, p. 101) That is to say, power is power to exploit or not to be exploited. In this way bourgeoisie seems to possess power as it is in position to extract and to avoid surplus labor. Labor class has no power, though it would get it in the process of the development of capitalism.

According to Marx, the capitalist class expands its network of power relations outside firms and industries. It permeates in almost all domains of life which further *multiplies*

the powerlessness of the labor class (Miller, 1984, p. 105). With the growth of capitalism the labor class not only materially depends upon the capitalist class but intellectually as well (Marx & Engels, 1965, p. 169).

Marx explains that the objective of capitalism is the maximization of profit. Capitalism realizes its objective through increasing labor time, minimizing wages, developing instruments of productions, introducing capital intensive methods of production, creating ideological masks, spending as less as possible on working conditions and so on (Marx & Engels, 2002). In brief, capitalism functions through *instrumental* violence on the labor class. Labor class confronts it as alien and highly indifferent power that imposes its power without taking into consideration the desires and needs of labor (Bhaduri & Robinson, 1980).

Marx considers capitalist power as a threat to freedom, justice and knowledge. It shows that his understanding of freedom, justice and knowledge stems from his commitment to defend and protect the interests of labor class (Nicolaus, 1996, pp. 191-196). As said earlier, the oppressed class manifests the genuine identity of a human being, only freedom and justice premised upon the interests of labor class is true. The capitalist class being in intrinsic conflict with the labor class can only generate and promote ideas that happen to strengthen the interests of its own class. It *calculatedly* creates those ideological masks which only maximize capital and power. It, therefore, hides what is true and masks injustice with freedom and equality (Larrain, 1996).

The private relations of production provide foundation to the capitalist power. The economic structure based upon the private ownership is the source of power. If the source is cut-off power can be brought down. Marx hopes that the class struggle can overthrow private relations of production (Marx & Jordan, 1972). Power can be brought down to a zero degree in the Marxist framework.

Freedom from power, for Marx, is possible because certain relations of production do not offer power to one group of individuals to exploit the rest. The society can be structured in such a way as to end all possible means of exploitations (Marx, 2008, p. 32).

Private relations of production cannot be overthrown until the Proletariat class either takes control of state through revolution or by winning the battle of democracy because in a modern society, Marx thinks, capitalist power has penetrated into the legal structure of society through which it defends and promotes itself (Marx, 1972). For this reason, in *German Ideology* Marx doubts *the very idea of the state* as the representation of general interest (Marx & Engels, 1965, p. 168). Marx claims that the concept of the common or general interest through which the modern state justifies itself as a moral agent is *nothing* but a fabricated illusion. For Marx, defending general interest within the structure which is constituted through private relations of productions is a contradiction in terms. In this text, Marx disputes the legitimacy of the modern state to defend a general interest on two different fronts.

First, he doubts the very concept of “general interest” in the face of the existence of “the division of labor” which, for Marx, implies a contradiction among the interests of

separate individuals (Marx & Lederer, 1958). It creates the conflict of interests among labor by dividing them into rival segments. The idea of general interest, for Marx, seems to have *no* factual foundation when the individuals are divided in their occupations and professions with conflicting wages, salaries and benefits. Under these economic conditions the idea of common interest can only be utilized for political purposes. Second, Marx rejects the Hegelian idea of the political state as a representation of general interests (Marx, 1977). In the face of privately owned property the political state would be an instrument in the hands of one group against the society. The political state cannot represent common interests but the interests of one class. Therefore, only by transforming the economic structure of society can we head towards political and social transformation.

When the state cannot, both theoretically and functionally, represent common interests *in* the capitalist relations of production; the state, according to Marx, is in the form in which the individuals of the ruling class assert their common interests, the form in which the ruling class establishes its joint domination as public power (Miliband & Miliband, 1965). The *Communist Manifesto* explains that state and its institutions exclusively serve the interests of a particular class and not public.

When power is defined as the capability to promote or to avoid surplus labor, the state in the contemporary world appears to Marx as an institution that holds power. Power based upon economic relations represents itself in the form of political institutions. Marx, acknowledging the *importance* of the modern state, writes in the *Communist Manifesto* that, "the immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: Formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat" (Marx & Engels, 2002, p. 251). Marx targeted the institutions of the state on the presumption that the capitalist class consolidates its power through political institutions.

In the following section we would shortly see that neither modern power may exclusively be located in the relations of production nor can the modern state encompass all relations of power. The modern power does not largely show itself through state legislation and juridical policies but it has penetrated deep down into social relations. Social relations as strategically located make possible the government of individuals.

Foucault's Refutation of Marx's View of Power

Methodological Refutation

Foucault imposes a methodological condition in advance before exploring modern power. Perhaps the aim is not to repeat Marx's methodological error. To Foucault, modern power always stays unnoticed if one approaches it from the perspective of Marx. Foucault argues that modern power must be analyzed and understood not *primarily* with reference to *who* exercises or wields it, but *why* and *how* decisions are made and accepted by everyone (Foucault, 1998, p. 103). Marx, from the start, approaches modern power with the presumption of "center". While presupposing the existence of class he understands modern configuration of power. Inclining towards postmodernism, Foucault contests Marx's presupposition of class and prefers to

approach power without reference to class (Dore, 2009). Although individuals make decisions, the decisions they make are only possible within certain set of power relations. But individuals make decisions not because they hold power. Instead, they are themselves within networks of power relations making possible for them to act upon emerging situations (Foucault, 1980, p. 104). The modern state or class cannot wield power in the sense of *property*. For, it is in itself an apparatus of power diffused in social relations. There is no political subject in the form of state holding power (Foucault, 1977, p. 181). Individuals or classes are not *autonomous* to exercise power. The individual or class is the effect or the point through which power manifests itself (Foucault, 1982, p. 78).

Foucault categorizes the perspective upon which Marx draws the conception of power as juridical which according to him, is embodied in the Western tradition (Foucault, 2012). Contemporary critiques of modern society and of state, no matter if they take the form of liberal, neoliberal, libertarian, conservative or Marxist, presuppose a version of juridical power (Lemke, 2001), (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996).

From the perspective of juridical power the power to frame law is considered to be the sole representation of power. The main characteristics of juridical power are considered to be the insistence of the rule, the cycle of prohibition, the logic of censorship and the uniformity of the apparatus (A. Allen, 2002). Owing to its juridical nature, power appears to be a *property* either held by the king or by the class or the state. Juridical power functions through a center based authority in a binary coordinates: governor and governed. In this scheme, power is presupposed to be at the disposal of governor/king/state/class. It rests upon the will of the state how, where and when to use it. From juridical perspective, power is not presupposed to be diffused to the point that it constitutes the subject in the form of classes and state apparatuses (Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991).

Empirical Refutation

Foucault considers that Marx's view of power is not empirically justifiable. According to Foucault, the state in its modern form started to develop from the Christian pastoral power and its institutions during the sixteenth century (Foucault & Rabinow, 2001, p. 332). Foucault disagrees with Marx on the formation of the state institution. According to Foucault, the objective of 'pastoral power' was to assure individual salvation in the next world. Pastoral power is different from 'royal power' (Foucault, 1999). Royal power commands and demands sacrifice from its subjects whenever required to save the throne. The pastoral form not only commands but also scarifies itself for the life and salvation of the subjects. This power looks after not just the whole community in totality but each and every individual during his entire life (Golder, 2007). It knows very well that salvation is not possible until and unless it does not have access to the minds, hearts and consciousness of the people. It has therefore developed the techniques of 'confession' that make possible the access to the inside of people's hearts (Foucault & Rabinow, 2001, p. 333). Marx is trapped in the classical framework of political thinking. He understands the modern configuration of power in the classical framework that is obsolete and outdated (Smart, 2013). The fundamentals of the classical framework are binary coordinates: king and subjects, the bourgeoisie and proletariat class, governor

and governed etc. In the backdrop of class conflict Marx explains the formation of modern state from the latent interests of bourgeois class. Under these conditions exploitation, not salvation is the salient feature of modern state.

But, according to Foucault, contemporary Western society is radically changed and substantially transformed. In the face of the modern configuration of power Foucault redefines power as force changing the conduct of others (Foucault & Rabinow, 2001, p. xvii). From this perspective, power is more than a capability to extract or to avoid the surplus labor. In Foucault's view power has various forms and strategies. We can discover the interwoven networks of power in family, institution, state apparatus, NGOs, international and business organizations. This specific definition of power puts Foucault's analysis of power outside the classical binary opposites.

Power as a means to control, shows the relevance of the notion of war *or struggle* as an effective analyzer of power mechanisms (Foucault & Rabinow, 2001, p. 116). By these power networks human conducts are disciplined and shaped (Foucault, 1977, p. 69). The individuals are, therefore, in the state of continuous battle. In this battle every one out of free will controls and refuses to be controlled by others (Yaakoby, 2012, p. 37). In the process of battle, social integration takes place in the society.

But, for Marx social integration is determined by economic structure in which the individuals of different societies, of various cultures, and of opposing civilizations are eventually to be integrated into one class with singular consciousness. Unlike Marx, Foucault does not view the social integration resulting from class consciousness but rather it is the result of 'social control' (Lianos, 2003). Hence, class struggle, for Foucault, is not an appropriate theoretical term to analyze modern society. In Foucault's scheme of things, no one is completely powerless or powerful.

Although Foucault acknowledges that in every society one may find different techniques as the technique of slavery, service, vassalage and asceticism through which the conducts of individuals have been controlled (Bratich, Packer, & McCarthy, 2003, pp. 144-145). Modern power, Foucault thinks, is a unique technique in the history of government of people. It is the only one of its kind because of three reasons. It holds unprecedented control, constant surveillance and aims to maximize utility and docility. Because of these characteristics Foucault terms it disciplinary power (Foucault, 1986, pp. 229-230).

Against Marx, Foucault argues that the accumulation of wealth and of men occurs at the same time. To put it squarely, the man is not forced to labor but he is constituted in advance as labor. The capital accumulation, for Foucault, is therefore not centrally based upon exploitation but upon the accumulation of men (Michael, 1982) (Foucault, 1977, pp. 220-221).

And accumulation of men is not attained by instrumental violence by 'normalizing judgment'. Normalizing judgment is the heart of all disciplinary power as each and every disciplinary mechanism functions as a small penal institute. "The workshop, the school, the army are subject to a whole micro-penalty of time (lateness, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of behavior

(impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body (incorrect attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency)” (Foucault, 1977, p. 178).

Foucault insists upon the point that power is a set of strategic immanent interaction (Foucault et al., 1991). One cannot specifically identify the location of power as it is diffused in the social relations to that extent that each individual appears to be an effect and an element of strategy (Lemke, 2007). For this reason, Foucault writes that one “needs to be nominalistic regarding the status of modern power. It is just a name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society (B. Allen, 2005, pp. 98-101).

So, these power relations are working from below. In order to locate the functioning of disciplinary power one does not need looking up to the state as the representative of power. Foucault never intended to claim any insignificance of state. Foucault established that the state in itself cannot occupy the whole field of actual power relations, and secondly but more importantly the functioning of the State relies on earlier prevailing power relations (Sharma & Gupta, 2009, pp. 131-143).

Pragmatic Refutation

Marx’s view of power is of no substantial use. Instead, it will be dangerous to organize political struggle upon it. Lacking empirical foundation, Marx’s analysis of power is not relevant to modern society. From the standpoint of classical divisions Marx understands modern networks of power in terms of bi-polarity of classes. He fails to recognize that the state is not the sole occupant of power. Rather, power is diffused. Marx is still trapped in binary coordinates. Foucault argues that “a political philosophy that isn’t erected around the problem of sovereignty, nor therefore around the problem of law and prohibition. We need to cut off the king’s head: in political theory that has still to be done” (Foucault, 2012, p. 99f).

Marx argues that the capture of the state would overthrow the class thereby it would restore freedom and justice. This is because the root cause of injustice and exploitation is radical imbalance of power in a given society. All power is concentrated in the hands of a small wealthy elite. But Foucault reminds us that power cannot exclusively be reduced to the state and economy.

When power appears to be a set of strategic relations, deeply diffused in social relations, not just in terms of the relations of production, it challenges the effectiveness of the idea of taking control of state institutions for the transformation of power. Foucault claims that power is much more complicated, denser and more diffused than a body of laws or a state apparatus. He argues that even if Marxists capture the state apparatus or democratically win the elections; it is not going to affect the structure of power relations (Foucault & Rabinow, 2001, p. 334).

Additionally, the modern state does not function through *instrumental violence*. It functions and intervenes through different rationalities: education, health, nutrition, hygiene, housing, madness, natural and environmental threats, medicine etc. (Lemke, 2001). Marx fails to understand modern power’s connection to enjoyment, desire, sex,

care and health. Foucault argues that the modern state no longer believes in the salvation of the individual in the next life but rather ensures the life of the individual in this world. The worldly salvation of individuals takes the form of health, well-being, security, sex, enjoyment and protection (Balibar, 1992). The modern state truly believes in the worldly salvation. So, understanding modern society in terms of hostility between state and civil society, between public and bureaucracy, between professionalism and state's intervention, between bourgeoisie and proletariat classes is misguided and unfruitful (Lemke, 2002).

Foucault in the series of lectures delivered at the *College de France* observes the decline in the influence of disciplinary power and the rise of bio-power in the management of the individuals. Foucault points out that the people are not at comfort with disciplinary power (Foucault & Trombadori, 1991, pp. 175-176).

In face of declining disciplinary power Foucault introduces a term of 'governmentality'. By governmentality Foucault means local set of strategies and mechanisms which focus upon population in terms of human resource (Foucault & Rabinow, 2001, p. 220). Governmentality allows the determination of the conduct and formation of knowledge. In this way it widens the scope and effectiveness of power (Pearce & Tombs, 1998).

The technology of governmentality and discipline has totally transformed the means of governing individuals. Individuals in the modern state are trained to govern themselves. Because of "self-government" they do not blame the political state for their problems (Cruikshank, 1993). Marx considers *direct* intervention of state or class. He failed to conceive of such form of the government in which the individuals without force and domination allow themselves to be governed (Dean, 2010).

Hatred of Power or the Utopia of Power Free Society Brings no Fruitful Results

Foucault challenges the common Marxist belief regarding the relationship between power and freedom. Marx believes that there is an intrinsic conflict between power and human freedom (Brenkert, 1979). According to Foucault, power relations are premised upon freedom. Without freedom there is no possibility of power but domination. Foucault makes an important distinction between the state of domination/force, and of power (Foucault & Rabinow, 2001, p. 283). According to Foucault, power turns into domination when power relations remain blocked, frozen instead of being mobile, allowing various participants to adopt strategies modifying them (Foucault, 2000, p.283). All power relations will not, therefore, be the target of critique. However, Marx targets all forms of power relations irrespective to its various forms and roles. Because of Marx's belief in historical materialism he does not conceive the possibility of such relations of power not open to challenge and criticism. Foucault rejects Marx's position that power *per se* is evil and is condemned to be in all of its forms and variations. To Foucault, a resistance to domination/force also rests upon the relations of power (Heller, 1996). So does the critique of Marx. Only within the network of power relations does it become possible for someone to influence the thinking and the conduct of others. Without being in power relations, the very idea of critique seems to be problematic and unpractical. The Foucauldian critique of domination does not aim to establish a power free society (Bevir, 1999).

There is nothing wrong with power relations as long as they do not turn into domination. Foucault gives the following example in the support of power. He writes that there is nothing wrong in the practice of teaching when a teacher transmits knowledge to students; the problem begins when the teacher arbitrarily and excessively uses his authority. Domination, not power, must be criticized and condemned. As human societies cannot avoid the network of power relations the hatred of power would bring forth unfruitful results. Developing the critique of all forms of power or challenging them may endanger greater values such as freedom. To Foucault, there is no possibility of the formation of society without power networks. He considers Marx's futuristic scheme of the communist or socialist society as power free to be a utopian and misguided construction of which there is no need and use (Kelly, Foucault, & Habermas, 1994). The utopia may disillusion individuals from concrete reality and put the critical project to anthropological sleep. In order to be critical one has to be specific, realistic and practical not to be abstract, idealistic and unpractical. To Foucault, Marx's deep hatred of power and utopian construction may bring society to dogmatism.

Useless to Advance Class Struggle

Foucault anticipates the rise of *resistance* movements, *not class struggles* against domination: the domination of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over the population, of administration over the ways people live. He rejects the effectiveness of the idea of class struggle (Pickett, 1996). As the modern state and its institutions do not primarily govern through instrumental violence rather than by soft rationalities, it does not create the deep sense of exploitation which Marxists considers essential for the development of class consciousness and class struggle. Predominantly because of this factor Foucault considers the relevance of 'single issue movements', not class struggle, in the face of the contemporary forms of domination (Szakolczai, 2013). This is because single issue movements are specific, not general or abstract as the class struggle is envisioned. They do not aim to transform the society in its totality but to challenge its specific forms of domination at a particular time and space. Single issue movements dissolve themselves with the accomplishments of their tasks. As they challenge the specific forms of domination single issue movements attract the effected individuals irrespective of their religion, culture, race, background, country and profession (Thompson, 2003, pp. 3-11). Being non-ideological in nature the scope of single issue movements is higher than class struggle. That is why from the perspective of Foucault the class struggle is impractical and useless.

Conclusion

There are dangers of taking Marx's exposition of power seriously. Marx may dangerously lead us to believe that the control of state and its institutions by the proletariat or suppressed class would pave the way for the total transformation of a given society. This approach may dangerously hide the real local power networks diffused in the social relations operating beyond the state apparatuses. We may always remain at the surface with the hope that surface changes would bring about deep structural transformations of society. Class struggle, even if possible, may only change the political or economic structure of society which is not structurally sufficient to challenge the local networks of power. Marx's deep hatred of power may promote the

habit of challenging each and every form of power. It may bring about the instances of chaos and disorder in society. This deep condemnation of power also encourages over-activism.

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