POWER AND NORM: NOTES*

N.B. — This translation is of a series of notes taken at a lecture given by Michel Foucault. It therefore has a very summary character, and while it has been included for its range of suggestions and indications, it should be clearly understood that in no sense is this a text "by" Michel Foucault. In the original lecture, the analysis of power relations was embedded in a long and detailed historical analysis of specific institutions. [Eds.]

It has been necessary to free ourselves from four sorts of analysis of power:
1. from the theoretical schema of appropriation of power, that is, from the idea that power is something that is possessed — something that some definite people possess — something that others do not possess. And that there is in society a group of people, a class, which possesses power and which is supposed to be the bourgeoisie;
2. from the notion of the localisation of power, that is, the idea that political power is always localised in a definite number of elements and essentially in the state apparatuses. Thus from the notion of the correspondence between forms of power and political structures;
3. from the notion of subordination. Thus from the idea that power is a definite type of maintenance, continuation and reproduction or a mode of production; that is, that power is always subordinated to a mode of production, which is always prior, if not historically, then analytically;
4. from the notion according to which power, within the order of knowledge, produces nothing but ideological effects.

1. — The formula "They have the power" may have its value politically; it does not do for an historical analysis.

   Power is not possessed, it acts in the very body and over the whole surface of the social field according to a system of relays, modes of connection, transmission, distribution, etc. Power acts through the smallest elements: the family, sexual relations, but also: residential relations, neighbourhoods, etc. As far as we go in the social network, we always find power as something which "runs through" it, that acts, that brings about effects. It becomes effective or not, that is, power is always a definite form of momentary and constantly reproduced


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From the 19th century on, every scholar becomes a processor of information, not just a producer. This was not the case in the past when information was more accessible and less processed. The shift towards a more information-driven society has led to a decline in the quality of critical thinking and a rise in the consumption of information. This has necessitated a new approach to education and the way we consume knowledge. Instead of simply absorbing information, we need to learn how to process it critically and effectively. This requires a deeper understanding of the nature of information and how it is constructed and transmitted. The goal is to create a society that is not only information-rich but also information-wise.
discourse constantly acted — although now conversely — in this domain.

That through which power worked in the 19th century were the habits imposed on definite groups. Power can give up its earlier display. It takes on the williest, everyday form of the norm, it conceals itself as power and gives itself out as society.

The role of the memory of power in the 17th century is then again taken up by what people called social consciousness. It is precisely there that Durkheim will find the subject matter of sociology (cf. his theory of anomie) in which he says that what constitutes the social as such — in opposition to the political, that is, the level of decisions, and the economic, which is the level of determination — is nothing but the system of compulsion, of "discipline", which means that it is the system of disciplinings, through which power works, but only insofar as it conceals itself and presents itself as the reality. This is now a knowledge that is to be gone through and described, and which presents society as the subject matter of sociology. Society as the subject matter of sociology is the system of disciplinings, as Durkheim has said. This system must be able to be analysed in the interior of the strategies characteristic of a system of powers.

The discourse that will now accompany the disciplinary power is that which grounds, analyses and specifies the norm in order to make it prescriptive. The discourse of the king can disappear and be replaced by the discourse of him who sets forth the norm, of him who engages in surveillance, who undertakes to distinguish the normal from the abnormal; that is, through the discourse of the teacher, the judge, the doctor, the psychiatrist, and finally and above all, the discourse of the psychoanalyst.

In the Assyrian kingdom the conditions for the renewal of power were assured by a definite mythical discourse which periodically related genealogy and the past. Today, in place of the discourse which is bound up with power, there has come forward a normalising discourse. That of the human sciences.

Translated by W. Suchting

* These notes are from a lecture given by Michel Foucault at the Collège de France, 28/3/1973. The translator consulted a German version in Mikrophysik der Macht. Über Strafjustiz, Psychiatrie und Medizin ( Internationale Marxistische Diskussion 61), Berlin: Merve Verlag, 1976.)