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Abstract

This paper provides a brief analysis of Michel Foucault's work on power and governmentality, and mounts the argument that the treatment of these concepts by Foucault is theoretical rather than empirical or historical. Foucault's approach – a Kantian dialectical approach – allows the social to engulf politics, sovereignty and the state. Ultimately, Foucault follows a Kantian line to a moral critique of society. Given this critical edge to Foucault's work, it is not surprising that endeavours such as critical discourse analysis use Foucault's work to ballast their approach. Like Bruno Latour, however, we suspect that the fascination with social and moral critique is exhausted; and we suspect that the commitment to critique masks the understanding of the critic as an historically specific persona, and disallows – on moral grounds – non-teleological descriptive analyses. Rather than critique critique, however – and risk being hoist by our own petard – our purpose here is an exploration of those who adopt the critical persona.

Keywords: Foucault; governmentality; critical discourse analysis

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Introduction

A number of qualitative research methodologies have sought inspiration from Michel Foucault's (1979; 1981) work on governmentality (see, for example, in the tradition of critical discourse analysis: Anderson, 2001; Luke, 1995-6; Teo, 2000). For some research traditions, for example, Foucault provides a theoretical predisposition to see an historical transition from sovereignty (in the premodern world) to liberalism (in the modern world); to see power as an omnipresent feature of society; to treat politics and society as coterminous; and to assume the government of people and things is a kind of Nietzschean will to power, built into social and political arrangements for the last few hundred years. This theoretical predisposition, then, provides what we may term a *sensitising effect*, such that any number of methods are subsequently employed in addition to (or, better, on top of) the Foucaultian starting point. Documentary analyses of various forms are typically the methods used in tandem with this Foucaultian

sensitivity. This strategic use of Foucault stems from a combination of the extreme difficulty of deriving a clear methodological guide from Foucault's work (hence his 'relegation' to theoretical inspiration, as opposed to direct methodological use) and the attractiveness of Foucault's diagnosis of modernity (a diagnosis that chimes with a long tradition of critical sociologies).

There is much that is valuable about the Foucaultian governmentality approach, and the work that has been inspired by it. In particular, the move to contest the vision of nation-states as monolithic, coherent entities has revealed the partial and contradictory nature of modern government, and its endemic tendency to failure and (almost pathological) reinvention. In addition, the understanding of programmes of government as acting at a variety of 'levels' – macro, meso and micro (although such standard sociological language is usually eschewed by the Foucaultians, the thrust of the argument is much the same), has drawn our attention to the role of previously neglected aspects of what Rose and Miller (1992) call 'political power beyond the state'. So, for example, at last there has been much-needed attention paid to the role of 'expertise' in the government of advanced liberal states: experts, working both inside and (crucially) outside formal state structures, help shape norms of conduct and are a crucial part of the invention of new forms of self (see, for example: Rose, 1999).

However, some research traditions have taken Foucault's analysis of modernity as an invitation to criticise that modernity; while we shall explain the nature of this criticism in more detail below, it suffices for the moment to gloss this critical attitude as the attempt to reveal the dominating effects of modern social relations. Critical discourse analysis is one such qualitative methodology, which will be dealt with briefly. In this paper, we argue that this may be a dangerous strategy; our perambulation through critical discourse analysis (CDA) pinpoints some of the points of danger.

Foucault: a thumbnail sketch of a theoretical project

There is a trajectory in Foucault's work from the analysis of discourse or forms of knowledge, especially human science knowledge (Foucault, 1971, 1973), to the analysis of the workings of power in modern and premodern western societies (Foucault, 1977, 1978), to the emphasis on the government of self and others (Foucault 1979, 1981, 1986a, 1986b). As this trajectory developed, Foucault became increasingly drawn to a worldview which saw power as omnipresent – a worldview which owed much to Nietzsche, and which was not so much relativist as perspectivalist (see Turner, 2002: 588, for a discussion of Nietzsche as perspectivalist rather than relativist). Foucault, then, like Nietzsche, did not take the ubiquity of power to mean that all forms of power were to be valued equally, nor did this prove the occasion for his adoption of a utilitarian approach to powerⁱ. Even though Foucault understands power as radically decoupled from human actorsⁱⁱ, and approaches what one might almost call a form of vitalismⁱⁱⁱ, nonetheless there is ever-present in Foucault the attachment to *critique*. Unlike Nietzsche, whose re-evaluation of morals privileged the strong over the weak, for Foucault, there is a commitment to the downtrodden: his analyses of the mistreatment of the insane, the perverted and the imprisoned aim to raise the profile of those whom society is quick to scandalise and exclude. The work on the government of self and others, then, maintains the insistence on the omnipresence of a 'microphysical' power which, while philosophically understood by Foucault as simply the vital connector between forms of knowledge, nonetheless in practical political examples is predisposed to the analysis of social inequality and social exclusion.

First Problem: Foucault's repression of sovereignty

As one of us has discussed elsewhere (Wickham 2006; 2007), Foucault and his followers are keen to distinguish two types of power: the ancient, negative form of power (what we might call sovereignty), and the modern, positive form (what we might call governmentality). Implicit in this distinction (which is, as Saunders 1997: 103 notes, theoretically rather than historically argued) is the idea that the age of sovereignty is over, and it has been replaced by the new techniques. Sovereignty, with its focus on territory, is slowly edged out by a more subtle and more ambitious form of power, which governs the 'men and things' in a specific territory, and the complex relations between all of these actors. As Foucault puts it:

[T]erritory is the fundamental element both of Machiavellian principality and also of juridical sovereignty as defined by the theoreticians and philosophers of right ... On the contrary, in La Perrière's text, you will notice that the definition of government in no way refers to the territory. One governs things. But what does this mean? I don't think it is a question of opposing things to men, but rather of showing that government does not bear on the territory but rather on the complex unit composed of men and things (Foucault 1979: 11).

Foucault's Kantian approach is revealed here, as he conceptualises a historical unfolding of the modern European state governed by a dialectical relation between sovereignty and governmentality. As Hunter argues, Foucault deals with the transition from cameralism to liberalism (from sovereignty to governmentality) in a way that conflates society and politics, and yet simultaneously allows society to emerge as determinant of politics.

The repressive potential of [cameralism] is played-off against the fissiparous tendencies of [liberalism] to produce the figure of the extra-judicial "social" restraining of economic self-interest — the figure of civil society ... [T]he logic of state reason and sovereignty fades from the governmental scene, which is henceforth concerned with the trade-off between order and liberty in a "socially governed" civil society' (Hunter 1998: 246).

What this move does, of course, is downplay politics and the state, and allows the social to swallow up both of these realms. Although the apologist for Foucault can find passages where he equivocates over the demise of sovereignty, or where he asserts that the state is real enough, nonetheless these entities become relatively powerless as society and governmentality take centre stage^v.

This first problem – allowing society limitless power – nurtures a second problem: the problem of critique.

Second Problem: Foucault's incitement to critique

Critique is the second key problem with Foucault. Latour (2004) suggests that critique has finally begun to lose its charismatic hold on us. The problem here is that the relativistic turn in academia looked attractive to many social researchers – but only as long as it enabled them to undercut the truth claims of those enterprises to which they held an ideological opposition. So, for example, in science studies, the radical move to understand science as socially constructed performed a number of useful functions: it reduced the status of the hard sciences^v and the hard scientists; it increased the status of the soft sciences that investigated the hard sciences; and it allowed science to be viewed as ideological (meaning inexorably connected to its social context) rather than 'true' (Fleck 1979 and Woolgar 1988 are well-known examples of this approach). As Hacking (1999) has clearly shown, the emphasis on social construction – a nominalist

approach – is useful for some examples, but the nominalistic approach can easily be over-extended: one would not want to be too nominalist about rocks, for example (*pace* Hacking's enchanting discussion of dolomite). A commitment to social construction often feeds forms of relativism, since it becomes hard to see which constructions might be worthy of our support, so the tendency can be to withhold it altogether. However, the move to a fully sceptical position on knowledge is rare: social constructionism is often directed to unmasking one form of truth – and is quick to posit replacement (more palatable) truths. This is the moment of critique: the possibility emerges for a rival understanding of the world which is understood as non-natural, ideological and 'bad'. What our discussion points to here is the extent to which critique – the unmasking function of academic research, the uncovering of the ideological element to truth claims – has recently come to rely upon a convenient mixture of relativism, nominalism, and a commitment to social constructionism. Foucault has been a key figure in this story. We suggest that the notion of the social as adumbrated by Foucault – a social which completely devours other spheres such as the political – is at the root of this problem of critique, as we argue below.

Unfortunately, once the technique of critique began to be used by 'other' groups – once the creationists claimed equality with the Darwinian scientists on the basis that all theories are equally valid and thus deserve equal consideration, once conspiracy theorists could claim that the moon landings or 9/11 were faked, because in our critical age, nothing is as it seems on the surface (Latour, 2004: 228) – it became clear that this relativism, this critical approach, might be a double-edged sword for the academy. The worry, of course, is that critique may simply be the insertion of belief into social scientific description. It is not yet clear that this lesson has been learned well enough, even though Max Weber devoted much of his life to hammering home this message. Many still hold to the reasoning that while 'our' beliefs are worth inserting into critique, 'your' beliefs are clearly ideological and a cause for concern (Kendall and Michael, 1997). The outsider may be less able to tell the good from the bad.

What is sometimes unappreciated in the rush to critique is that the critical intellectual is a particular type of persona allowed by the idiosyncratic history of the west. We have discussed this in more detail elsewhere (see Wickham and Kendall 2007), but can briefly sketch how this happens. The privileged place society assumes allows forms of social critique (of politics and of government) to emerge. However, this social critique inevitably becomes moral critique, because the failings of the state – from the point of view of a presumed-to-be virtuous society – are foregrounded. This dialectical mode of thinking is familiar from Marx through to Habermas, but it relies on a kind of dehistoricisation of the persona of the critic. Social criticism can think of itself as universal, yet its habits of mind are part of a historically-constituted way of life (Hadot 1995). The critic, of course, depends for her/his very existence on the state and the rule of law; yet these platforms on which the critic stands become the targets of social/moral critique. This form of social criticism always looks forward to a future in which the power of the state and the rule of law have been eliminated, and a naturally virtuous society can flourish. In his neglect of the state, and his emphasis on a ubiquitous social power, Foucault feeds this dialectical manner of thinking. It becomes, perhaps, less surprising that Foucault is rendered as a critical supplement to other forms of analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis: a brief case study of 'unmasking'

It is in the commitment to critique that some researchers in the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA) have fallen under the spell of Foucault. Wodak (2004) gives a clear account of the historical development of CDA. In short, it emerged from other forms of discourse analysis and conversation analysis, but the critical edge was

supplied by its commitment to the demystification of dominant ideologies in the service of various forms of emancipation. Foucault was coopted to this programme because his emphasis on power – and on critique – gave a moral edge to what might otherwise be seen as a rather mechanical linguistic analysis. In other variants, Foucault's critical edge could be added to, or replaced entirely, by other favoured theorists of ideology, especially Pêcheux, Habermas and Bourdieu. Foucault has a special place in CDA, however, because not only do his conceptions of power and governmentality link in a fairly straightforward way to the commitment to 'unmasking', but his rather extended notion of discourse (to include texts, the organisation of knowledge, worldviews, etc.) also allowed researchers to go beyond oral performances and written documents. Nonetheless, we should acknowledge Wodak's (2004: 198) point that Foucault is merely one possible source for a definition of discourse, and other notions of discourse are regularly used in CDA. It is Foucault's insistence on social critique rather than his notion of discourse that is, perhaps, more influential.

Lest it seem we are too antagonistic to CDA, it is worth specifying some elements of its approach that are strong. It aims to be abductive (Wodak, 2004: 200) – that is, to move constantly between theoretical insights and empirical observation. This brings us to an inevitable problem with grounded theories of all sorts that they are never completely atheoretical, and consequently the laudable aim of generating theory out of data rather than fitting data to pre-existing theories is a constant difficulty. The emphasis on the abductive approach promises to get at least some way around this problem. Following on from this, it is hardly surprising that CDA is attracted to middle-range theories, seeing in Merton's (e.g. 1957) work the blueprint for a practice that is constantly reflexive.

Nonetheless, in spite of these strengths, CDA is, as its name suggests, a marriage of discourse analysis and critique – with all the problems of critique we have already discussed. So, for example, Fairclough (2000) analyses how the language of New Labour enables the 'New Capitalism' (downsizing, restructuring, etc.), while Graham (2003) develops this work to paint a picture of how authoritative institutions develop and use new media and new linguistic forms to maintain power. For Graham, the new knowledge economy is inexorably made part of the structure of capitalism; here, critique is added to textual analysis to provide a damning account of the latest phase of capitalism. Marx's political economy is upgraded such that the knowledge economy is integrated into the familiar dialectic. Similarly, we find Anderson (2001) — a discourse analyst who marries Foucault to Fairclough — makes use of Foucault to criticise national education standards. Luke, another discourse analyst directly inspired by Foucault, produces an account of social inequality between children and others as "moments for making explicit a political and social order in which caregivers and children construct ideological versions of the world" (Luke 1995-6: 23). Teo, also Foucault-influenced, writes of discourses about race that explicitly aims "to make transparent the processes that enter into the construction of social inequality and injustice" (Teo, 2000: 44). For all of these critical discourse analysts, Foucault's critical edge allows a moral critique to enable them to go beyond description to share with us their unhappiness about a world in which society has not yet secured a victory over the state.

Concluding Remarks

Foucault is well known for his attempts to differentiate himself from the history of ideas and from a conventional understanding of social theory, preferring to see his work as empirical historical work. Those who have taken up Foucault's work have (perhaps too readily) agreed with this self-diagnosis, and have regarded governmentality as one or both of an empirical programme and a form of discourse analysis. Foucault becomes a

methodological inspiration, and governmentality research becomes a form of what Kuhn called 'normal science': we all agree on the governmentality paradigm, and the task is to fill in the missing historical details. Unfortunately, all this paradigm tends to do is insert the researcher's belief system into the more descriptive work of textual research (in our example, CDA).

However, governmentality needs to be understood as a rather conventional history of ideas concept: that is to say, governmentality in the hands of Foucault and his followers is a kind of 'spirit of the age' (a theoretical rather than historical concept), and is rarely subjected to empirical scrutiny. Instead, empirical work is collected that, unsurprisingly, fits the theory. Like our Kuhnian normal scientists, the researcher who follows Foucault's governmentality model is unable to see any other model (or any empirical evidence that contradicts the theory). Such a researcher is reduced to a circular form of argumentation, where the concept of governmentality is assumed *a priori* and then ballasted by all empirical evidence which can only ever be seen as the former's instantiation. Similarly, the forms of critical discourse analysis that flow from the governmentality perspective are trapped in a circular logic. More specifically, this form of reasoning relies on a dialectical approach in which the triumph of one over another is earnestly hoped for. The historical basis for this fond hope – the figure of the critic – is, of course, the result of the very processes s/he hopes to overcome. Latour is right that the critic is a figure with whom we have had enough; yet Latour does not stress enough just how deeply embedded in our history this moral persona is. Perhaps what Latour has noticed is the death of the critic – of that universal representative of humanity who unselfconsciously speaks for us all against the enemies of freedom. But it is to be hoped that when all the bluster of the critic has gone, the conditions of that freedom might be more easily estimated.

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ⁱ Indeed, it was left to Bruno Latour (1986) to push a radically relativist version of power – a version so relativist it becomes realist, or so Latour would have us believe.

ⁱⁱ This is a point that very few commentators on Foucault recognise, with the notable exceptions of Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour. As Deleuze makes clear, Foucault's account emphasises power as 'forces' that mediate between 'forms' – so, for example, the two poles of knowledge (the discursive and the non-discursive) are held in an agonistic relationship by forces (power) that are mute and blind, avoiding - as they must - the visible and the sayable, yet constantly scurrying between the two. Power, then, is something like the electricity that maintains agonistic relations between the sayable and the visible, and, incidentally, ensures that the latter is not engulfed by the former (see Deleuze 1988). The genius of Latour's work is to understand this aspect of Foucault's work, and to develop a notion of networks in which power moves between actors but never inhabits the same space: we can't carry power around with us, but we can be part of the network of its activation. The trite observation that Foucault's work on power is relational often masks the deeper philosophical point that it is relational precisely because power is removed from human actors (or what Latour, following Greimas, calls 'actants') – see Latour (1986). This is discussed in detail in Kendall and Wickham (1999).

ⁱⁱⁱ We call this 'vitalism', mindful of the importance of both Canguilhem and Deleuze to Foucault's work, and gesturing towards the emergent properties of power and its role as the (almost metaphysical) motor of knowledge. The reader interested in the topic of vitalism will gain much from Canguilhem 1994. Latour is again perhaps the most faithful Foucaultian, as he constantly maintains this philosophy of emergence and process, as can be seen in his endorsement of the philosophy of A.N. Whitehead – see Latour (2004)

^{iv} Occasionally, Foucault softens this dichotomy between sovereignty and governmentality. So, for example, in Foucault (1979: 19), he insists upon the triangle of sovereignty-discipline-government. Nonetheless, as Hunter (1998) makes clear, he has to forget this interaction because of the strong role which the social is called upon to play in liberally governed modern societies.

^v To some eyes. One might be forgiven for thinking that scientists barely noticed their loss of status.