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Foucault's Interpretation of Modernity

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How Does Michel Foucault Understand Modernity? What Role Do Notions of Discipline and Biopower Play in His Account of the Birth of Modernity?

There are considerable ambiguities within the work of Michael Foucault which complicate the work of understanding his position with regards to modernity, and leave a legacy of multiple and diverse interpretations of his work. Space requires that not all of these interpretations, or indeed all of Foucault's concepts receive an airing. The context for Foucault's critique of modernity is the particular episteme or power/knowledge regimes that govern historical periods, modernity comprising one of these (Fraser, 1985: 168). However he also argues that it is more relevant to envision modernity as an attitude, one that questions and transfigures the present (Foucault, 1997: 309/311), at least for the purposes of philosophical interrogation. To this end the essay only lightly touches on the more historical aspects of modernity before moving on to discuss the theoretical basis of Foucault's own conception of modernity. Briefly and selectively the essay analyses the constituent parts of his account to address the question, including pastoral and biopower, which influence the purposive-rationality of power systems, and the exercise of discipline in modernity. The foil of Weberian rationalism is used to illustrate the key characteristic of Foucault's understanding of modernity in the tension between purposive rationality and autonomy, and to address some criticisms of this area. Finally a further key criticism of many theorists of modernity, that of ethnocentrism, is addressed as it is a charge that is particularly relevant if it has the potential to devalue Foucault's position on modernity or limit it's applications, and here it is attempted to refute the charge in a limited fashion.

Modernity is a contingent historical event, and the modern state is a transactional reality that relies on conceptual and normative maps (Lemke, 2007: 7). In this account a new form of power in the political structure of the state and wider society has been developed since the 16th century, also drawing on and expanding an older technique of 'pastoral' power that has it's origins in Christian institutions (Foucault, 1982: 782). Pastoral power has a number of features which Foucault argues makes it unique; these features can be characterised as more reciprocal than that of royal power, in that it must respond to the community and the individual for their salvation, and for this it also requires intimate knowledge of it's subjects. This is relevant because it is the spread of these functions or their adaptation which distinguishes the modern period, as they inform the new organization of the state towards the end of the 18th century: "In a way, we can see the state as a modern matrix of individualisation or a new form of pastoral power." (Foucault, 1982: 783). From this it possible to see the root of Foucault's conception of the modern state and power as both totalizing and individualizing – the parallel here is in the modern state caring for the community but also for the individual, operating at all levels preserving the individual and their productive capabilities within this matrix (Foucault, 1982: 785). The development of biopower is located in the biological existence of the population and it's productive abilities, meaning the drive to rationalize the response to the political and economic issues generated by human beings constituted as a population in modernity (Foucault, 1997: 73). The capacity of the modern state, as it developed increasingly has relied on the capacity of the population (Tribe, 2009: 684). Rather than territory the population is the key referent for the processes of power, for practical and constituent purposes being concerned with the maintenance and growth of the social body and identifying it as the object of the collection of processes called governance.

A particular economy of power and purpose then is identified at the heart of modernity, supported by discipline – the period is characterised by a huge increase in the productivity of power and new channels through which it operated

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(Foucault, 1982: 788). The modernity which Foucault identifies is centred on the development of a new power/knowledge regime which constituted Man as both an object of this regime, and as its subject (Fraser, 1985: 169). This problematic part of this conception can be traced to humanism which Foucault rejects as being conflated with modernism and correlating with techniques of discipline (Love, 1989: 273). The new regime is distinguished from previous historical periods by new processes of power which operate on the mind rather than the corporeal body, which can be seen through examples such as the workhouse and the asylum. These forms of social and psychological control are more comprehensive and pervasive than the previous practices of power (Dews, 1984: 74). However although exploring the techniques of power is useful in understanding his view of modernity Foucault states that the focus of this is not to create a theory of power or methodology, but instead to examine the former point as to how man is objectified and becomes a subject (Foucault: 1982: 777). The subjugation of man to these techniques is central to the more critical stance Foucault takes towards modernism, which argues against its teleological idealism and rejection of aspects that deny the possibility of ontological self-criticism (Foucault, 1997b: 314). Instead Foucault's critique of modernism is partial and local, a 'critical ontology' that allows us to explore and transgress limits in a positive fashion (Love, 1989: 275).

Moving away from an emphasis on institutional or legal frameworks, Foucault instead takes human beings as the referent objects for, and instruments of, the processes of power (Foucault, 1982: 778). The secularized state and the associated processes of power however are not geared towards salvation in the next life, but instead towards worldly objectives such as well-being (Foucault, 1982: 784). The key feature of the modern state is that it has centralized and rationalised these processes under its own auspices and direction (Foucault, 1982: 793). How this comes about is explored through the concepts of discipline and biopower, and the tension that the processes of power have with autonomy (which other conceptions of modernity take as their teleological endpoint, clearest in Marxian theory). The latter point is worth briefly clarifying before we move on. The tension between disciplinary processes and autonomy in modernity can also shape one another, and has productive potential in terms of transformative resistance rather than the abrogated conception of freedom as private autonomy of the individual (Koopman, 2010: 557). Acting in tension with the conduct of power and its contestation is a cornerstone of all societies/regimes, including modernity (Foucault, 1982: 791). The liberation of one from the other removes the potential for this transformative resistance, and in a sense leaves man unarmed against the types of disciplinary power discussed below.

A key transition for modernity was one from legalistic subjugation, relying on example and rational-legalistic justifications such as the social contract, to one of power as disciplinary (Koopman, 2010: 555). In Foucault's conception of discipline power is not exercised through the punishment of the physical body, but is instead aimed at the mind of the subject. In modernity discipline, and the exercise of power is primarily concerned with creating and maintaining norms. 'Normalising' extends across society in all areas of communal activity and is 'totalizing' in this regard and norming marks a shift from coercion or repression as a means of control (Fraser, 1985: 174). This is illustrated in his work through the example of the Panopticon, which forces prisoners to police themselves for fear of being under surveillance, which can be seen as applying to wider society and the new more effective processes of power (Dews, 1984: 77). The discipline enacted by modern forms of power is qualitatively different in this instance by operating internally to individuals, influenced by the pastoral aspects discussed earlier. "The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome." (Foucault, 1982: 789); this quote illustrates how far modernity has progressed from limited symbolic and coercive processes, to more effective forms of power influenced by the human sciences. Social order is maintained through regulating behaviour and expectations, and additionally through the categories of normalcy or deviancy (Fraser, 1985: 174). How capabilities can be disconnected from this intensification of power relations and the processes of discipline is one of the fundamental questions of modernity (Foucault, 1997b: 317).

However this is one of the areas where Foucault can be interpreted in a range of ways; one of the more damaging of these according to Koopman (2010: 548) has been in drawing parallels with Weber, and specifically the latter's 'iron cage' of modern rationalism, as the process of disciplining society in Foucault's account excludes deviancy and leaves rationalism and the processes of power in primacy as an unavoidable consequence of modernity which we can do little against. This leaves rationalism in Foucault's account as only instrumental, and robs it of any emancipatory or productive capability (Love, 1989: 271). One of his key critics, Habermas (1981) argued that Foucault denied the emancipatory potential of modernity whilst utilising it himself. Koopman instead proposes that

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Foucault's understanding of modernity is not of it as excluding deviancy, but that modernity preserves and separates it, to which the proper response is transgression of these barriers (2010: 551). Implicit in this is that transgression is a positive and productive interaction, but one that is limited by the current articulation of modernism which wholly separates the two – in essence it argues for experimentation and challenging the processes of power in perpetuity, rather than total domination or emancipation. Far from being wholly negative Foucault engaged positively with modernism, but arguing against being forced to take a fixed position; he characterised being 'for or against' the Enlightenment as intellectual blackmail (Foucault, 1997b: 314).

Foucault's account is very much rooted in the West, and is vulnerable to charges of ethnocentrism such as those made by Timothy Mitchell, who argues that in Foucault's work there is a silence surrounding the activities and parallels of modernism in empire/colonialism (Mitchell, 2000: 5). However although there is an emphasis on the particular and local, and in particular on the premise of pastoral power rooted in the Christian Church to illustrate his points, it is far from clear that this necessarily precludes simultaneous modernities – rather it is in Europe where modernity has received it's most comprehensive exposition and critical attention. This is argued because it is the West that has utilised and sustained the dominant paradigm of modernism, and does not necessarily preclude the development of alternative histories if Foucault's account of modernity is a historicized account rather than universalistic or reified. This refutes the criticism that modernity is defined by a claim to universality (Mitchell, 2000: 24), which imposes on all works regarding modernity, including Foucault's, a false unity so as to support the supposition that there cannot be alternate modernities and the charge of ethnocentrism.

In conclusion, this account of Foucault's thoughts on modernity has attempted to sketch a continuity through the composition of modernity, and in particular through the use of concepts of power, discipline and biopower which influence it's growth. It also expands on this, heavily drawing on Koopman's (2010) work, for the sections on rationality and autonomy; it should be noted that the selection of different sources may well have resulted in substantially different interpretations of these concepts and their relationship to one another. The thread of this account has followed the theoretical origins of modernity and it's constituent parts, which does not condemn modernity but point to some of it's hazards and also it's potential. Foucault's understanding of modernity, rather than being wholly negative, is focused on the constructive potential of transgression or transfiguration in modernity, in creating new forms of subjugation and enabling experimentation in social forms; "... criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value but, rather, as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying." (Foucault, 1997b: 315).

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