

Michel Foucault: Quotes re: power

See also the section on "Method" in History of Sexuality Volume I," pp. 92-102

1. Power is something exercised, put into action, in relationships – an active *relation* rather than a possession or static state of affairs. (See also *Discipline and Punish* p. 26)

"...[power] is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated. Power functions. Power is exercised through networks, and individuals do not simply circulate in those networks; they are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays. In other words, power passes through individuals. It is not applied to them." (*Society Must be Defended* 29).

"Power is relations; power is not a thing, it is a relationship between two individuals... such that one can direct the behaviour of another or determine the behaviour of another. Voluntarily determining it in terms of a number of objectives which are also one's own" (Interview, "What our Present Is" 410). Power is "the exercise of something that one could call *government* in a very wide sense of the term. One can govern a society, one can govern a group, a community, a family; one can govern a person. When I say 'govern someone,' it is simply in the sense that one can determine one's behaviour in terms of a strategy by resorting to a number of tactics" (410.)

"Power exists only when it is put into action" (Interview, "The Subject and Power" 219); "it is a mode of action which ... acts upon [others'] actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future"; "it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or [or subjects] by virtue of their acting or being capable of action" (220); It is a matter of guiding, leading the conduct of others; it is a question of "government"; to exercise power in the sense of "government" is "to structure the possible field of action of others" (221).

2. Power relations always leave open the possibility for resistance (see also *Discipline and Punish* 27)

"[W]hat I mean by power relations is that we are in a strategic situation towards each other. . . . we are in this struggle, and the continuation of this situation can influence the behavior or nonbehavior of the other. So we are not trapped. We are always in this kind of situation. It means that we always have possibilities of changing the situation. We cannot jump *outside* the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it. So what I've said does not mean that we are always trapped, but that we are always free. Well anyway, that there is always the possibility of changing." (Interview, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity" 386)

"It seems to me that power *is* 'always already there', that one is never 'outside' it... [But] to say that one can never be 'outside' power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what... [Resistances] are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised" (Interview, "Power and Strategies" 141-142).

"Power relations include two elements: "that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up." (Interview, "The Subject and Power" 220) "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized" (221)

"[I]f it is true that at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom, then there is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight... It would not be possible for power relations to exist without points of insubordination which, by definition, are means of escape." (Interview, "The Subject and Power" 225)

3. Power relations are multiple, local, and diffused throughout social relations (See also *Discipline and Punish* p. 27)

"I don't want to say that the State isn't important; what I want to say is that relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the State.... [T]he state can

only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations. The State is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth” (Interview, “Truth and Power” 122)

“Between every point of a social body between a man and a woman, between the members of a family, between a master and his pupil, between every one who knows and every one who does not, there exist relations of power ...” (Interview, “The History of Sexuality” 187)

I would suggest ... (but these are hypotheses which will need exploring): (i) that power is coextensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network; (ii) that relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality) for which they play at once a conditioning and a conditioned role; (iv) ... that dispersed, heteromorphous, localised procedures of power are adapted, re-inforced and transformed by ... global strategies ...” (Interview, “Power and Strategies” 142).

“...we should make an ascending analysis of power, or in other words begin with its infinitesimal mechanisms, which have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics, and then look at how these mechanisms of power, which have their solidity and, in a sense, their own technology, have been and are invested, colonized, used, inflected, transformed, displaced, extended, and so on by increasingly general mechanisms and forms of overall domination” (*Society Must be Defended* 30).

4. Power relations do not operate only through repression or hindrance; they are also productive

“In defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception of such power, one identifies power with a law which says no, power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition. If power were never anything but repressive, ... do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (Interview, “Truth & Power” 119)

5. Power/knowledge: the interdependence of power relations & what counts as *truth & knowledge* (See also *Discipline and Punish* p. 27-28)

“Truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power. ... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (Interview, “Truth and Power” 131).

“'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth” (Interview, “Truth and Power” 133).

Relations of power “are indissociable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work. Power cannot be exercised unless a certain economy of discourses of truth functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power” (*Society Must be Defended* 24).

“...we are obliged to produce the truth by the power that demands truth and needs it in order to function: we are constrained, we are condemned to admit the truth or to discover it. Power constantly asks questions and questions us; it constantly investigates and records; it institutionalizes the search for the truth, professionalizes it, and rewards it. ... In a different sense, we are also subject to the truth in the sense that truth lays down the law: it is the discourse of truth that decides, at least in part; it conveys and propels effects of power.” (*Society Must be Defended* 25).

“We should not be content to say that power has a need for such-and-such a discovery, such-and-such a form of knowledge, but we should add that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information. ... The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. ... It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Interview, “Prison Talk” 51-52).

6. Not all power relations are relations of “domination”

“The analysis of power relations is an extremely complex area: one sometimes encounters what may be called situations or states of domination in which the power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain blocked, frozen. When an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political or military means, one is faced with what may be called a state of domination. In such a state, it is certain that practices of freedom do not exist or exist only unilaterally or are extremely constrained and limited (Interview: “Ethics of the Concern for Self” 434).

“Of course, states of domination do indeed exist. In a great many cases power relations are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and allow an extremely limited margin of freedom. To take what is undoubtedly a very simplified example, one cannot say that it was only men who wielded power in the conventional marital structure of the 18th and 19th centuries; women had quite a few options: they could deceive their husbands, pilfer money from them, refuse them sex. Yet they were still in a state of domination insofar as these options were ultimately only stratagems that never succeeded in reversing the situation”(Interview: “Ethics of the Concern for Self” 441-442).

Works Cited

The interviews “Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity” (1982), and “What Our Present Is” (1983) can be found in: *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, 2nd ed., ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996).

The interview “The Subject and Power” (1982, I think) can be found in: Dreyfus, Hubert L. and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

The interviews “Power and Strategies” (1st publ. 1977), “Prison Talk” (1st publ. 1975) and “Truth and power” (1st publ. 1977) can be found in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon, 1980.

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