Truth and Power

Philosophy 157
G. J. Mattey
©2002

Ideology

- Marxists and capitalists are polarized over ideology
- Marxists condemn "class domination"
- Capitalists condemn "totalitarianism"
- Both ideologies obscure the "mechanics of power"
- They focus on the large-scale aspects of power while overlooking the small-scale aspects, which are much more revealing
- Ideology itself grows out of more fundamental conditions (e.g., economic conditions)

The "Holy Trinity"

- Three thinkers were most influential on European thought in the second part of the 20th century
- **Marx** advocated political and economic struggle to overcome the oppression of the proletariat
- **Freud** diagnosed deviant mental states as the result of repression of drives
- **Nietzsche** explained human reality historically, in terms of power relations

Capitalist Libertarianism

- The ideal of capitalist libertarianism is to free the individual to allow maximum self-development
- It is based on the "self" as an autonomous agent, whose existence Foucault denies
- It attempts to make these agents regulate themselves through institutions of "discipline"
- It understands power through the institutions of law, which Foucault says obscures small-scale institutions of power

Foucault and the Marxists

- Marxists dominated intellectual life in mid-20th century France and ignored Foucault's work
- They restricted their interest to central fields such as mathematics, physics, economics
- They were concerned with power only with respect to the apparatus of the state
- Therefore, they overlooked marginal sciences such as psychiatry and the way they involve power

Foucault and Freud

- Freud investigated deviant mental states, which is one of Foucault's main subjects
- Freud postulated internal repression to account for these states
- Foucault noted that psychiatry employs external repression: institutionalizing or trying to "normalize" the deviant
- He held that repression is only the negative side of power, which has a positive role as well

Phenomenology

- Phenomenology emphasizes the "constituent subject"
- It was a prominent methodology during Foucault's education
- He rejected transcendental or ahistorical accounts of the constitution of the self
- The self is constituted through historical events and practices, based on power

Power and Metapower

- Traditional studies of power focus on its highest levels
- In modern society, power is concentrated in the state or the sovereign
- But for Foucault, this is "metapower," which sits on a basis of "a whole series of power networks"
- These networks "invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology, and so forth"

Structuralism

- Structuralists (especially in linguistics and anthropology) tried to find the underlying structure in all practices and discourse
- They ignored contingent, historical events
- Foucault thought that the model for explaining human practices is not symbolic structures such as language, but war
- The strategic nature of human practices cannot be captured by abstract structures

Positive and Negative Power

- The juridical conception of power focuses on repression (the army, the police, the tax man)
- But power has a positive, productive side
- Modern societies organize power at the lower levels (e.g., through education, support for technology)

Foucault and Nietzsche

- Nietzsche understood the relationship between power and "truth," in the context of struggle
- Truth is not an essential structure to be uncovered
- Foucault saw truth as a production of power: power-relations produce "discourse" (e.g., science) which is their "truth"
- Truth is thus not opposed to error, illusion, or mere ideology
- The problem of truth is to free it from social, economic, and cultural hegemony

An Example: Sexuality

- Bourgeois society attempts to repress young people's interest in sex
- This has the opposite effect of sexualizing everything for them
- "'Sexuality' is far more of a positive product of power than power was ever repression of sexuality"

Problems of Power

- The productive power of people is based on regimes of discipline, wherein they are manipulated and conditioned
- These regimes must be supported administratively
- This gives rise to problems of "demography, public health, hygiene, housing conditions, longevity, and fertility"
- Sexuality is a problem because it lies at the join between discipline of the body and population control

Truth and Power

- Truth in societies like ours has five traits:
- A form of discourse, with its institutions
- Constant political and economic incitement
- Diffusion and consumption
- Control by a few large political and social apparati
- The object of ideological struggle

Coping with Power

- The intellectual plays the leading role in coping with power relations
- The old model is that of a "universal" intellectual, based on the "man of law," who invokes conceptions such as justice
- The writer has given way to the academic
- The new model is the that of the "specific" intellectual, who criticizes power networks from within them
- An example is a nuclear scientist who opposes nuclear weapons

The Specific Intellectual

- In the context of these truth-inducing power-networks, the intellectual has three positions
- A class position
- A vocational position
- A position in the specific institutions of truth
- The intellectual can, within the specific, have an effect on the wider "regime of truth"

Truth and Discourse

- Societies have "regimes of truth," which are embodied in discourse, including:
- Special status for certain types of discourse
- Criteria for establishing truth and falsehood
- Rewards and sanctions
- Favored techniques for gaining truth
- Establishment of authorities to establish truth