A CRITIQUE OF FOUCAULT'S POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

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In this paper an attempt is made to evaluate the role and importance of power and knowledge in the Foucaultian thought. One salient aspect of his approach to the problem is that he uses historical analysis as a key to understand this. Historical view, according to him, is an essential preliminary for an examination of his account of power. His thought is rooted in a highly individual historical vision, which centers on the transition from traditional to modern, industrial societies, and is specifically concerned with the forms of knowledge and modes of social organization characteristic of capitalist modernity. Hence this paper approaches the notion of power with the understanding of historical view and moves further to analyse the notion. The paper is a critique of the notion of power and knowledge taking into consideration his approach to the problem and it analyses whether Foucaultian approach is acceptable one in the post-modern society.

I

Foucault's contribution to post-modern thinking is highly important, though he will not associate himself with post-modernism completely. He cannot be placed in one category or group, as he is a complex thinker. He was a critique of reason and Western thought, like Nietzsche and Bataille. The impact of Nietzsche and Bataille on Foucault is noteworthy. It was Nietzsche who started the post-metaphysical and post-humanist approach in philosophy, and from him, Foucault learnt what is known as "genealogical history". Also from Nietzsche, he understood that the will to truth and knowledge is indissociable from the will to power. Nietzsche's following claims are very important in shaping Foucault's

mind. (i) Systematizing methods produce reductive social and historical analysis and (ii) knowledge is perspectival in nature, requiring multiple viewpoints to interpret a heterogeneous reality. Foucault as a critic of modernity and humanism, approached the problems like society, knowledge, and power, and made a considerable influence on the post-modern thinking. Foucault draws upon an anti-Enlightenment tradition that rejects the equation of reason, emancipation and progress. He asserts that an interface between modern forms of power and knowledge has served to create new forms of domination.

A close study of historic-philosophical study, for which Foucault is famous, attempts to explain the above point from different perspectives, like psychology, medicine, punishment and criminilogy. His purpose is to write a critique of our historical era, which problematizes modern forms of knowledge, rationality, social institutions, and subjectivity that seem given and natural, but in fact are contingent socio-historical constructs of power and domination. Apart from Nietzsche, the second influence came from Bataille, who also was a critic of Enlightenment reason and the reality principle of Western culture. Like Nietzsche, Bataille also supported the realm of heterogeneity and attacked the sovereign philosophical subject and argued in favour of transgressive experiences. focused on the social and discursive practices that play a role in the formation of the human subject. Throughout his philosophical writings he examined the means by which social and personal identity are generated and objectified. One of the most important of these strategies consists of dividing practices which categorize, label, isolate and exclude the subject from what is considered "normal" social intercourse. In Madness and Civilization he deals with how these dividing practices operated in the case of "insane" and pointed out that the manipulative procedures used to implement dividing practices change over time. In The Birth of Clinic and Discipline and Punish, Foucault continued this genealogical investigation of the rules and norms generating dividing practices. In The Order of Things and The Archaeology of Knowledge, he dealt with the autonomous structures of knowledge. He always relates knowledge with domination. Knowledge, according to him, is always part of a cultural matrix of power relations. His critique of modernity and humanism, and development of new perspectives on society, knowledge, discourse and power, thus made him the important thinker of post-modern thought.

H

Foucault combined pre-modern, modern and post-modern perspectives. He makes a distinction between the classical era (1660-1800) and the modern era (1800-1950) in the post-renaissance period and says that in the classical era, we can see how human beings were dominated by power. He rejects the idea that human progress from combat to combat; humanity installs each of its violence in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination. Modern rationality is a coercive force, according to him. He talks about the individuals who have been dominated through social institutions, discourses and practices. The task of the Enlightenment was to multiply " reasons for political power" and to disseminate it through the social field, eventually saturating the spaces of everyday life. In his writings of 1970s, Foucault stigmatizes modern rationality, institutions, and forms of subjectivity as sources or constructs of domination. Analysis While modern of knowledge and truth became the main task for him. theories tend to see knowldege and truth as neutral, objective, universal or vehicles of progress and emancipation, Foucault analyses them as integral components of power and domination. He valorizes the amazing efficacy of discontinuous, particular and local criticism as compared to the inhibiting effect of global, totalitarian theories. For this reason, he is often considered a champion of post-modernism where incommensurablity, difference and fragmentation play an important role, though Foucault cannot be labeled as a post-modern thinker alone. Because in his writings one can see the culmination of pre-modernism, modernism and postmodernism.

All the time, he has been supporting the need for plurality forms of knowledge and micrioanalysis. His aim is to detotalize history and society as unified wholes governed by a centre, essence or telos, and to decentre

the subject. His approach to history as a non-evolutionary, fragmented field of disconnect knowledge, and society as a dispersed regularity of unevenly developing levels of discourse are important. In short, he is one of the supporters of "difference". "Respect...difference" has been his slogan. Nietzsche's conception that the world has no single meaning but rather countless meanings and that there is no limit to the ways in which the world can be interpreted, has paved the way for Foucault to reject the notion of approaching reality from a particular standpoint or from one particular way of philosophical thinking. He has understood that discourse is a complex reality that we not only can but also should approach it at different levels with different methods. This means for Foucault, no single theory of method of interpretation can be acceptable. It is because there is always plurality of discourses, institutions and modes of power, which contribute to the modern society.

Foucault uses the terms like "archaeology" and "genealogy" to denote the new historiographical approach while discussing the critique of modernity. He says that his objective is to create a history of the different modes, which, in our culture human beings are made subjects. earlier writings, Foucault had been using the term "ontology of knowl-His usage of the term "ontology" is different from that of "Archaeology", i.e., historical approach, is also different from hermeneutics. It is also different from idealism and humanist mode of continuous evolution of thought. For example, in hermeneutics, there is a need for seeking a deep truth underlying discourse also. In idealist and humanist mode of writing, there is a search for "continuous" evolution of thought in terms of tradition. Archaeology rejects both. It tries to identify the condition of possibility of knowledge, the determining rules of formation of discursive rationality that operates beneath the level of intention or the thematic content. In his writings, the term "genealogy" plays an important role. He defines the word as follows:

Let us give the term *genealogy* to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories, which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of theis knowledge tactically today....What it really does is to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledge against the claims of unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchies, and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects.¹

Genealogy, for Foucault, depends on the voices of the disqualified in order to disrupt the serenity of what is. Though some argue that in his later period, he rejected the notion of testimony of the other, he maintained the view that genealogy reveals contingency as opposed to necessity and it is contingencies that allow the possibility of freedom. A close study of Foucault's works like, *Madness and Civilization* and *The History of Sexuality* prove that he believes humanism and reason have functioned in the West as definitive, exclusionary terms and the identity of the society is formed on what it forcefully excludes. Foucault questions the possibility of a pure other. In *Discipline and Punish*, he argues that the excluded are never outside. "The carceral network does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside. It takes back with one hand what it seems to exclude with the other. It saves everything, including what it punishes."²

In his interesting essay," What Is Enlightenment?" Foucault articulates how his critical practices differ from that of Kantian critique, where necessary condition plays a role. He says:

This criticism is not transendental, and its goal is not that of making metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method...This critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form to what we are, what it is impossible for us to do and to know, but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.³

The above passage clearly shows that Genealogy exists as an alternative to transcendental thinking of Kant. It also teaches that history could have been other than what it has been. History is the product of

successive power struggles, which are discontinuous. Foucault who emerged two centuries after Kant observes the continuity of his post-Nietzschean genealogy with the classical critique of reason. He says:

I think that the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: What is this reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers?⁴

But Foucault emphasized the discontinuity also. He says:

If the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today (is)... In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligating, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitary constraints?⁵

The questions of Foucault prove that he is for practical critique of reason. In the above essay, Foucault attempts to transcribe the Kantian critique as an attitude that is addressed permanently to the discourses through which subject is constituted.⁶ Foucault's view about the relationship between knowledge, autonomy and political action does not presume the trascendental implications of pure reason as in the case of Kant. Each person is viewed as the subject of knowledge and the self is always situated within the control of social, economic and political institutions. The possibility of Enlightenment, according to Foucault, is not something connected with a priori necessity inscribed in and practical reason, but that which enters into medicine, psychiatry, criminology, sexual hygienic, etc., as strategies of domination. In *Madness and Civilization, Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality* one can see his genealogies of sanity and madness, sickness and health, sexuality and perversion.

In the well-known essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory"? Horkheimer supports the notion of critical theory. The standard conception of theory, otherwise known as traditional theory, is the collected knowledge, which is useful for describing facts, and from Descartes to

Kant and Husserl, we find such type of knowledge. Horkheimer makes a distinction between traditional and critical theory. One of the important tasks of criticial theory is to challenge the privileged "non-position" of social-scientific knowledge by analyzing the modes of its production, the roles it played in society, the interests it served, and the historical processes through which it came to power. It is concerned with the historical and social genesis of the facts it examines and with the social contexts in which it results will have their effects. Later, the book Dialectic of Enlightenment⁸ appeared in support of critical theory. It also was in favour of the critical historiography. Nietzsche analyses modernity's preoccupation with history as a sign of its loss of a sense, of its own role in history. Modernity tries to break with its past, but to know that its achievements are creative and novel, it must look back to see whether the past had anticipated it. Thinking historically, is thus a peculiar paradigmatic feature of modernity. In other words, thinking historically means, more than thinking about the methods of historiography or the events of history, for even thinking about other topics like knowledge, culture, morality, religion etc., can involve increased and perhaps, even exclusive concern with their historical nature. One can see the elements of critical history developed by Horkheimer in Foucault, who talks about three ways of thinking historically. (1) Antiquarian historiography tries to recreate the past as it really was, ignoring the present as if the present dose not condition how the past is achieved and understood. (2) Monumental historiography, looks at the past for models of how to act in the present, ignoring the novelty of the present and diminishing the significance of present agents by comparison with the triumphs of past heroes. (3) Criticial historiography takes into consideration of both the present and future. Foucault is in favour of such historiography, which is visible in his approach to knowledge and power. Horkheimer and Adorno helped Foucault a great deal to develop his theory of power. One can see the influence of this in Discipline and Punish. The passage from Dialectic of Enlightenment explains how Foucault developed his theory of power:

Where the evolution of the machine has already turned into that

of the machinery of domination ...untruth is not represented merely by the outdistanced. As against that, adaptation to the power of progress involves the progress of power, and each time anew brings about those degenerations which show not unsuccessful but successful progress to be its contrary.⁹

Foucault echoes the above point in *Discipline and Punish*, which shall be shown in the following discussion.

Marcuse in "Philosophy and Critical Theory" argues that reason is the fundamental category of philosophical thought, the category by which it has bound itself to human destiny. He says that in classical philosophy, it represents the highest human potential and in the modern period, it comes to be represented as self-conscious self-determination. He further states that what remains outstanding to the realization of reason is not a philosophical task. This means that the philosophical concept of free rational action was seriously inadequate. Critical theory is always concerned with the life of reason, not with mere reason, but with critical reason, which has helped Foucault to develop the theory of critical historiography.

Foucault attempts to rethink the nature of modern power in a nontotalizing, non-presentational and anti-humanist scheme. He says that to this day we have yet to fully comprehend the nature of power. He rejects the notion of modern power to be anchored in macrostructures for ruling He gives a post-modern approach to power and sees power as dispersed indeterminate, heterogeneous, subjects and productive, constituting individuals' bodies and identities. He argues how the two models of power, namely the economical and the judicial are defective. For example, the economic model suggested by the Marxists has to be regarded as a reductionistic subordination of power to class domination. On the other hand, the judicial model approached power in terms of law, legal and moral right and political sovereignty. In The History of Sexuality. Foucault talks of a new mode of power known as "bio-power". It is biopower which according to Foucault, lies at the root of the Nazi Holocaust.

He argues that with the constitution of bio-power as the central concern of the modern state, sex became the focus of an explosion of discourses concerning the health of the body. Thus discourses like, organic physiology, gynecology, neurology, psychology etc., which established life as the focus of power where the primary concern was the body and descent of the classes that ruled.¹³

Foucault believes that every production of knowledge serves the interest of power. Thus knowledge produced in economics, medicine, psychiatry and other human sciences is nothing but a part of the power of the social institutions that have grown around these disciplines. Foucult talks of three characteristics of power. First, power is productive. Secondly, it is only exercised by individuals but never possessed by them and thirdly, power is involved in every social relation. His contention is that the individual does not stand apart from power prior to it. Since individual is constituted by power, individual existence and identity are among power effects. The individual exercises power at certain times and in certain places as a functionary of power's intentions, but not his own. He further says:

There is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject...the rationality of power is characterized by tactics that are often quite explicit at the restricted level where thy are inscribed tactics which, becoming connected to one another.¹⁴

Thus for Foucault, the individual is not the agent who puts power into play; on the other hand, individual is the element of power's articulation.

Stressing the role of power, Foucault further argues that a society without power relations can only be an abstraction and in every social field, there are relations of power throughout. He wants us to reject the notion that knowledge can exist only where power relations are suspended.

He is of the view that it is power which produces knowledge. Power and knowledge directly imply one another. There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge. Similarly, there is no knowledge, which does not presuppose power relations. Thus he denies the independent knowledge. In Discipline and punish, and other writings one can see the relation between power and knowledge which is scattered in different forms. In Madness and Civilization he argues that man is historically constituted as the other of reason. In The Birth of the Clinic, he talks about the movement from a premodern speculatively based medicine to a modern empirically based medicine rooted in the rationality of the scientific gaze. Again in The Order of Things, he discusses the emergence of the human sciences and the importance of such a study where the rules, assumptions focusing on the shifts in the sciences of life, labour and knowledge of human societies are important.

The Archaeology of Knowledge, he corrects some of his past In mistakes. This was due to the influence of French historians like Bachlard and Canguithem. In this work, Foucault maintins that discontinuity is a positive working concept. It is no longer seen as blight on the historical nature and stigmatized in principle. Foucault tries to break up the unity approach of Hegel and Marx with regard to evolutionary history and tries to see the possibility of having number of groups. This detotalizing move is the contribution of Foucault, which allows multiplicity of discourses in knowledge. With this concept, he attacks the traditional interpretation of But for this reason we cannot define him as philosopher of discontinuity. In the philosophy of discontinuity of Foucault, the break is not so radical; it does not simply negate everything that had preceded it. Very rightly, he says: "Rupture is possible only on the basis of rules that are already in operation"15 Discontinuity does not mean complete change but a redistribution, a reconfiguration, a redefining. Thus in Foucault one can see the synthesis of continuity and discontinuity.

In The Archaeology of Knowledge, he undertook two responsibilities. Decentering the subject and critical analysis of reason are these two

important responsibilities. The work attempts to show that the subject is a fictitious construct. For him, archaeology would be the appropriate methdology of the analysis of local discourses. It criticized the human sciences as being grounded in humanist assumptions. It also theorized the birth of the human sciences in the context of the modern episteme. 1970, the transition from archaeology to genealogy took place. Genealogy is a new mode of historical writing, according to him. It seeks to foreground the material context of subject construction. A significant aspect of it is that it links theories to the operation of power and tries to put historical knowledge to operate in local struggles. It highlights the power and effects relations they produced. Foucault is interested in writing the histories of unknown, forgotten, rejected, uncared, marginal discourses. He firmly believed that the discourses of madness, medicine, punishment and sexuality to have independent histories and institutional identity, which are neither reducible nor enlargeable institutions like that of the modern state.

It was during the 1970s, he developed the theroy of power and his historical vision of problems like madness, poverty and unemployment, has helped him a great deal to develop his theory of power. He says that to this day, we have yet to fully comprehend the nature of power. He tries to approach the notion of power from a non-totalising, non-reprsentational, and anti- humanist approach. Foucault's approach to the theory of power is rooted in a highly individual historical vision, which centers on the transition from tradition to modern industrial societies. He was mainly concerned with the forms of knowledge and models of social organization. His concept of power could be understood only in the context of the historical foundation of the modern west. He made a bold approach to conceive problems like madness, poverty, unemployment, the inability to work etc., as social problems and it is the responsibility of the state to take care of these. His approach to historical analysis can be seen in Madness and Civilization and The Birth of the Clinic. His concern here was with the emergence of modern form of administration of the social world. In both the works, he makes it clear that his concern was with the physical rather than the moral disorder. The intervention in the social domain by agencies of welfare and control is more fundamental feature of modern societies than an economy released from directly political relations of domination. In the two books that followed namely, The Order of Things The Archaeology of Knowledge, his attention was towards the internal structure of scientific discourse especially the discourse of human sciences. Again in Discipline and Punish, the historical analysis becomes prominent. Here, Foucault explains the notion of power as follows: "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'makes', it In fact power produces; it produces realities; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth"16 He rejects the repressive and negative aspects of power and apprehends it as primarily positive and Power constitutes the individuals on whom and through productive. whom it subsequently operates. He says:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals.¹⁷

He explains the importance of power in *The History of Sexuality* as omnipresence. Power is produced at every moment, at every point, or rather in every relation between points. "Power is everywhere; not because it englobes everything, but because it comes from everywhere" says Foucault.

In the writings of 1970 one can see the relation between forms of power and forms of knowledge. In fact there is a fusion between the two. While discussing the relation between the two, he says that power is a precondition of knowledge rather than knowledge as a pre-condition of power. He talks about the transformation of the fundamental structures of

experience through which human beings become able to think of themselves as the subjects of a purely procedural rationality of inquiry and to consider other irrational human beings as the possible objects of such an inquiry. He explains how the relation between power and knowledge concerns the repressive institutions, which make the formation of certain kinds of knowledge possible. He contends:

"If it has been possible to constitute a knowledge of the body, this has been possible to constitute a knowledge of the body, this has been by way of an ensemble of military and educational disciplines. It was on the basis of power over the body that a physiological, origins knowledge of it became possible." ¹⁹

His conviction is that the power and knowledge cannot even analytically be separated. "...it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge." He stresses the point that power and knowledge directly imply one another and there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time relations of power. For Foucault, structuralism is the captive to classical form of knowledge, and for this reason he rejects it.

Ш

Habermas was more sympathetic towards Foucault. The transition from archaeology to genealogy in Foucault and his preoccupation with the theory of power is very much appreciated by Habermas. In his work, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas asks the following question:

What, then, are the grounds that determine Foucault to shift the meaning of this specific will to knowledge and to truth that is constitutive for the modern form of knowledge in general, and for the human sciences in particular, by generalizing this will to knowing selfmastery into a will to power *per se* and to postulate that *all* discourses can be shown to have the character of hidden power and derive from the practices of power?²¹

Habermas himself tries to answer the above question by saying that if one takes the question of episteme, one can never master it. He says that this is precisely the reason for Foucault to go without the concept of episteme altogether. Habermas says: "When he (Foucault) gives up the autonomy of the forms of knowledge in favour of their foundation within power technologies and subordinates the archeology of knowledge to the genealogy that explains the emergence of knowledge from the practices of power."22 Thus Habermas very well supports Foucault with regard to the theory of power and genealogy. Does this mean that Habermas has nothing to disagree with Foucault? Habermas says that the concealed derivation of the concept of power from the concept of the will to knowledge in Foucault is systematically ambiguous. He says that the trace of the philosophy of subject is not completely absent in Foucault. nealogical historiography is supposed to be... the functionalist social science and at the same time historical research into constitutive social science."23 Habermas further says: "Foucault did not think through the aporias of his own approach well enough to see how his theory of power was overtaken by a fate similar to that of the human sciences rooted in the philosophy of the subject."24 Though Habermas supports Foucault's critiques of subjectivity and the institutions of modernity, at the same time Habermas argues that Foucault has no standpoint from which to criticize modern institutions and has no basis for ethics and politics. Both Foucault and Habermas relate knowledge to power but Foucault links reason with power and domination, but Habermas distinguishes different types of Habermas also criticizes Foucault for rejecting modernity and reason. Enlightenment.

All of Foucault's writings from *Madness and Civilization* to the *History of Sexuality* presuppose a close proximity of power and knowledge. But according to the critics, the concept of power has a drawback

because of this intrinsic relation between knowledge and power. It is also argued that his critique of modernity is one-sided in its focus on repressive forms of rationalization and fails to acknowledge the merits of His criticism that modernity has brought only domination cannot be accepted because modernity has brought advances in medicine, democracy, liberty, law or equality which are not acknowledged by For him, power breeds resistance but the nature of this Foucault. resistance is not explained by him. In other words, he has not properly developed the notion of genealogy of resistance. Also, his understanding that power is mostly understood as an impersonal and anonymous force, which is exercised apart from the actions and intentions cannot be correct. He has not taken into account how the agents in positions of economic and political power administrate power. Though he talks about the microlevel of resistance, in power struggle, he does not discuss the modalities of local struggles. No doubt, the importance of local struggles cannot be neglected, but the multiplicity of the local struggle must be properly united or linked in order to avoid fragmentation. Otherwise the local struggle lose their significance. All microstruggles must be related to marcostruggles to oppose the domination of power. Foucault has neglected this aspect. But it is an indisputable fact that Foucault could approach the theory of power from a post-modern perspective, though it has certain deficiencies.

NOTES

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- 2. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, New York: Random House, 1979,p.301.
- Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed., P. Rainbow, Penguin, 1991 p. 46.
- 4. Foucault, "Space, Knowledge and Power", Ibid., p. 249.
- 5. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", Ibid., p. 45.

- 6. Ibid., p. 42.
- Horkheimer, "Tradition and Critical Theory" tr. Matthew J. O'Connell in Critical Theory, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972,pp. 188-243.
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- 9. Ibid., pp. 35-6.
- Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory" tr Jeremy J. Shapiro, in Negations, Boston: Beacon, 1968.
- 11. Ibid., p. 136.
- 12. Ibid., p. 137
- 13. Foucault, The History of Sexuality, vol. I, p. 123.
- 14. Foucault, Power/Knowledge, Brighton, 1980, p.95.
- 15. Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, New York: Pantheon, 1972, p. 17.
- 16. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 174.
- 17. Foucault, Power/Knowledge, p. 98.
- 18. Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol. I, p. 93.
- 19. Foucault, Power/Knowledge, p.59.
- 20. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, p. 28.
- Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, tr. Fredrick Lawrence, Cambridge: MA, MIT Press, 1987, p. 265.
- 22. Ibid., p. 268.
- 23. Ibid., p. 274.
- 24. Ibid., p.274