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POWER, RESISTANCE, AND SUBJECTIVITY: A FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

This paper explores Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power and resistance, emphasizing their intertwined and dynamic nature. Foucault challenges traditional repressive notions of power, instead proposing a multidimensional and productive framework where power is diffused, relational, and pervasive. He contends that power is not merely possessed but exercised through discursive and institutional structures, shaping both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic subject positions. The study delves into Foucault's three phases of thought—archaeological, genealogical, and ethical—tracing the evolution of his analysis from knowledge structures to disciplinary mechanisms and the constitution of subjectivity. A central argument of this paper is that power and resistance are ontologically coexistent, with resistance functioning not as an external force but as an intrinsic aspect of power dynamics. This paradoxical relationship enables the continuous reconfiguration of social hierarchies and subjectivities. The paper further examines the implications of Foucault's ideas for feminist and political discourses, particularly regarding the redistribution of power as a resource for social equity. Ultimately, this analysis underscores how resistance is not merely a reaction to power but a fundamental force that drives social transformation and the rearticulation of subject positions.

Keywords: *Power, Resistance, Subjectivity, Discourse, Social Change, Knowledge Production, etc.*

The Foucauldian conception of power and resistance multidimensionalizes dominant value systems by laying bare the contingent and power-seeking genealogies underlying them, implying a kind of liberation for the people previously controlled or marginalized by such systems. Before initiating a deliberation on the Foucauldian conception of power/resistance, it is apt to place Foucault's work in a context with a brief overview of his work. His work is divided into three main categories: archaeological, genealogical, and ethical. The three spheres follow a chronological order and correspond to his early, middle, and later works. His archaeological works, which include *The Birth of the Clinic, The Order of Things,* and *The Archaeology of*

Knowledge, deal with exploring the structures/discursive formations/epistemes that underlie what can be said, how new disciplines emerged, and how shifts in understanding occurred. The primary object of the archaeological works is the analysis of knowledge as a category in itself. His genealogical works include *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* (Volume I). Here, Foucault is more interested in analyzing practices and discourses in a more dynamic manner, and it is in this phase that he introduces his concept of power. The focus remains on ruptures and discontinuities. In a subtle sense, Foucault holds that power isn't unilateral; it is not negative; and it is not possessed by one individual or a group of individuals. Rather, power can be productive and positive. The third phase of Foucault's work is labeled as ethical, which includes *The History of Sexuality* series, *The Use of Pleasure, The Care of the Self,* etc. His ethical works largely deal with the conceptualization of subjectivity.

Foucault contends that power refers to the *transformative* capacity whereby an individual is able to alter the actions of other individuals for realizing one's own strategic and tactical aims. Foucault states:

> …the exercise of power is a way in which certain actions modify others [and] a structure of actions brought to bear on possible actions. The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct (Foucault, *The Subject and Power*, 788-89).

It is in this context that he believes that power is all-pervasive and asserts to be a certain kind of ongoing modification facilitating clashes and thus amounts to the social dynamics of change. Understood in this sense, power may be considered to possess a quality dimension since it enables the individuals to foster *change*. In other words, Foucault's analysis presupposes that power is a kind of power-over; and he puts it, "…if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others" (Foucault, *Afterword: The Subject and Power*, 217). Notably, there are two salient features of this definition of power: power is understood in terms of power-over relations, and it is defined in terms of its actual exercise.

The Foucauldian conceptualization does not equate power with repression. Foucault criticizes previous analyses of power (primarily Marxist and Freudian) for assuming that power is fundamentally repressive. Although Foucault does not deny that power sometimes functions repressively, he maintains that it is primarily productive. It also, according to Foucault, produces subjects. Modern power subjects individuals in both senses of the term; it simultaneously creates them as subjects by subjecting them to power. He further contends that power is the medium by way of which the social hierarchies undergo change(s). In addition, such change(s) may delimit or promote human freedom. Seen thus, power may be used to confirm repression/subordination; however, power in itself is not repression. In this sense, power "…traverses and produces things….it needs to be considered as a productive network" (Foucault, *Truth and Power,* 119). Further, he conceives power as "…the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the processes which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transform, strengthen, or reverse them;…thus forming a chain or system" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 92).

Here it is apt to consider other important dimensions, i.e., the source of power and the way (s) in which it is exercised / distributed in society, highlighting a covert intent to alter the actions

of other individuals. Foucault makes a significant observation by stating that power behaves neither like a structured institution nor as an inborn strength on the part of certain individuals. Rather, it is scattered here and there, and thus it is not a permanent property of any specific individual or a group of individuals. Power is "…everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 93). It is exercised through a net-like pattern consisting of a system of differentiations that includes economic differences, linguistic differences, cultural differences, etc.

In this way, power facilitates this system of differentiations and thus sustains clashes in the social realm. Such a system of differentiation may be understood as the mechanism(s) of power. Further, there exists a problematized relationship between mechanisms of power and the exercise of power. The exercise of power influences the fragilities of the power paradigm (which pre-exists for enabling the exercise of power and enables its functionality). In this sense, the exercise of power is dependent upon the availability of a pre-existing power paradigm. Hence, the power mechanisms are endowed with multi-vocal and multivalent power relations, and they cannot be reduced to the certain individuals who exercise them. In this way, power is a circulating phenomenon and acts like a machine wherein everyone is caught. The power relations condense the participants in its pre-existing web, which is difficult to control. Interestingly, no group of individuals holds a totalizing and frozen sway over the dynamics of power. However, the pre-existing power paradigm enables certain individuals/groups to control a moderately larger chunk of mechanisms of power. In this sense, everyone does not enjoy the same position, and it results in the making of a dominant class (hegemonic masculinity), which mobilizes its tools to dominate the sociopolitical domain. It implies that despite the fact of its pervasive presence, power is *not* distributed equally in society. Hence, absolute power (rigid patriarchy) is a practical impossibility. In this sense, power is capable of causing social integration as well. So, power may be understood as a positive resource of social good that is currently unequally distributed amongst women and men. From a feminist point of view, the goal is to redistribute this resource so that women will have power equal to men. However, it is worth confirming that the Foucauldian power is beyond the binary of positivity and negativity, *but* it happens to possess an ability to reify social change(s). In this sense, power exists only in action and thus must be understood dynamically, as existing in ongoing processes or interactions.

It is in this broader context that Foucault asserts that power is both intentional (tactical) and non-subjective (strategic). Power is non-subjective because there happens to be a disjunction between the intention of an action and its actual effect. Foucault contends that people are often aware of whatever they do; however, they don't know what they're doing *does*. Important to highlight, such non-subjective articulation is institutionally and socially regulated before it acts to cause social change. Moving on, the Foucauldian conception of power exhibits the following core dimensions:

    a. Power isn't just a thing but an ongoing relation.
    b. It isn't simply repressive but is interactively productive.
    c. It isn't the sole property of the state but runs through the social formation(s).
    d. The exercise of power through power mechanisms is dependent upon the availability of a pre-existing power paradigm.
    e. The unintended consequences of actions.
    f. The decentered construction of subjectivity.

In the context of the last point, i.e., the decentered construction of subjectivity, Foucault holds that individual subjects are produced by a pre-existing system of power relations. He contends that a subject is ontologically bound by the discourses through which one's subjectivity is constructed. Such construction is also marked with the socio-cultural, political, and institutional topography of social formation. However, subjects differ in terms of discursively choosing different *tactics* of the topography of social formation. In other words, mechanisms of power signify differing planes of knowledge that organize and influence the larger socio-cultural existence of individuals. Such organized knowledge underpins exercises of power. Hence, he understands power as a certain kind of tactic/strategy that is produced through a knowledge-producing power relation that exists pervasively in a society.

The apparent autonomy of all subjects is inevitably delimited in spirit and substance. Seen thus, it is problematic to conceive the possibility of liberated subjectivity. It implies that subjects are constructed discursively so as to remain compatible with the dominant position(s) in the social order. Thus, it marginalizes the counter-hegemonic subject positions. This brings us to evaluate the nature and existence of counter-hegemonic subject positions vis-à-vis the dynamics of social formation. In this context, he holds that subjectification is a heterogeneous process. He further affirms that we are constituted as peripheral subjects as a result of the effects of power. In addition, such discursive formation is dependent on historically specific discourses that simultaneously produce hegemonic and counter-hegemonic subject positions. In this sense, all subjects are subjected to discourses so as to create hegemonic and counter-hegemonic subject positions. Further, the existence of conflict upholds the being of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic subject positions.

Such counter-hegemonic subject positions populate the dynamics of social formation by way of a 'reverse discourse'. This stance brings us nearer to the Foucauldian notion of resistance. As already discussed, power isn't the sole property of any individual or group of individuals. Further, all social formations are structurally incompatible. Accordingly, resistance also mandates the co-existence of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic subject positions within a social formation. Secondly, it is practically impossible to eliminate the counter-hegemonic resistance within the ambit of social formation. In this way, power does have a determinate opposite, i.e., resistance. Hence, social formation isn't possible in which only power is operative. In this manner, power and resistance may not be understood as different categories. Rather, both of these concepts relate to the same capacity of causing social change. On a condensing note, these two entities are ontologically entwined. In addition, resistance may also be understood as lesser forms of power that are creatively exercised by the marginalized individuals. Further, the detailed analysis of Foucault's conception of power makes it sufficiently clear that power is ubiquitous, diffused, and a circulating phenomenon, and this complicates the phenomenon of resistance. It is significant to note here that resistance also parallels the diffusion of power. In other words, resistance is equally diffused in the social realm and thus is not localized in any place. Consequently, in order to understand the reproductive nature of power, it is essential to comprehend the characteristics of resistance or the characteristics of power-resistance confluence. Interestingly, Foucault designates resistance as an odd element in the matrix of power relations. In one sense, resistance eludes power, which implies that it stands as an opponent against power.

At the same time, resistance also works as a resource of power because the elements upon which power exerts its influence are never rendered impotent. In this sense, resistance to power is not outside power. However, power is also not an obstacle for resistance. In other words, it is

difficult to resist power, yet it is always inevitable to resist the strategies of power. Consequently, power is not to be conceived as a monolithic/autonomous entity, but it hosts a ceaseless struggle fueled by the politics of power relations. Hence, something always eludes the magnet of power and finds its expression through the codes of resistance. This is because of the fact that human beings do not possess certain essences. In this way, human subjectivity finds its expression in myriad possible ways, which may disguise the moves of resistance. Accordingly, resistance is an in-built property of our subjectification. Complicating it further, power may also produce what resists it most since power, by its very nature, cuddles multiplicities. Such multiplicities/diffusions actually enhance the impact of power. Not only this, but power is also far more efficient when it is in hidden form because, in this form, it is able to cajole resistance (though provisionally). It is worth substantiating here that resistance is provoked or pacified by the dynamics of power. In this sense, power is necessitated to be hierarchical and unequal in nature. Such an unequal and hierarchical nature of power proves to be counter-power, and thus it is the source of resistance.

It is pertinent to clarify here that Foucault does not interpret resistance as the negation of power. In other words, the relationship between power and resistance isn't so naïve and simplistic. Rather, it is important to reiterate that it is equally productive and employs the techniques of power also. In addition, a serious intent for understanding the chameleon-like functioning of power, it is imperative to comprehend the nuances of resistance. In this context, it is worth stressing that the Foucauldian resistance is quite indeterminate in its very nature because Foucault's genealogy does not prescribe any schema of the way(s) one should struggle. In this sense, Foucault appears to be more interested in problematizing the phenomenon of struggle rather than formulating a theory of dialectical resolution(s). In order to make resistance more potent, the Foucauldian position privileges the stance of fostering the conditions of struggle.

Foucault's notion of power, while seemingly all-encompassing, does not render resistance futile; rather, it is within the very pervasiveness of power that resistance finds its potency. By rejecting a reductive, repressive model of power, Foucault instead envisions a dynamic interplay where power's omnipresence generates continuous sites of resistance. This dialectic transforms resistance into an active and creative force capable of disrupting entrenched hierarchies and reshaping social formations. Resistance, therefore, is not merely reactive but a productive mechanism that fosters new subjectivities and alternative modes of existence. It enables individuals to challenge the conditions of their own subjectification, engaging in revisionist praxis that reconfigures dominant discourses and hegemonic structures. In this sense, resistance is integral to the process of self-creation and social transformation, not merely an opposition but a rearticulation of power itself. By refusing to formulate a prescriptive model, Foucault emphasizes resistance as an ongoing, decentralized engagement rather than a final resolution. This framework urges us to rethink power relations beyond rigid binaries, embracing a fluid and multifaceted struggle that perpetually renegotiates social, political, and institutional landscapes. Thus, resistance is not only inevitable but essential, serving as the vital counterforce that ensures the continuous evolution of power and subjectivity in society.

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To Cite the Article: Sharma, Narinder & Niharika."Power, Resistance, and Subjectivity: A Foucauldian Perspective." Literary Cognizance, V - 4 (March, 2025): 36-41. Web.*