To what extent does Foucault's work encourage us to rethink the social formation and governance?

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In this essay I will attempt to demonstrate that, although Foucault's work appears to offer a radical way in which the social world may be criticised and ultimately improved, this is unfortunately only an appearance. I will argue that the necessary foundation of Foucault's radicalism, the historicisation of epistemological and power structures, seriously limits the scope of his critique and, quite possibly, undermines it entirely. I will also show that although Foucault is aware of this criticism, his response to it is inadequate and provides no means by which a positively undesirable rethink of social formation and governance may be prevented.

Foucault provides us with an exhilarating and panoramic account of the numerous ways in which power relations are formed, sustained and internalised throughout history. Through his archaeological and genealogical methods and the concept of the episteme, he shows, with the use of a wide range of historical examples, the inextricable connection between various disciplines in the social and natural sciences and the relations of power that delineate the boundary between what is permitted/forbidden in an area of knowledge or, in the case of the social sciences, and especially psychiatry, what is regarded as normal/abnormal behaviour. As Kearney says, Foucault shows us that, "Scientific disciplines, in short, serve the interests of discipline" (1994, p291). An episteme provides a framework within which epistemological norms (evaluative criteria for determining the acceptable forms of both questions and answers) commingle with an extensive set of power relations that have a real world effect, both on the ways in which human behaviour is regulated and on the way in which, "human beings are made subjects." (Foucault 1980 cited Rabinow 1984, p.7)

In one of his best known works, Madness and Civilisation, Foucault (2008) demonstrates the transformation in the way that the madman was viewed from the seventeenth century onwards. As psychiatry became an increasingly dominant discourse, the madman's status shifted dramatically. From being regarded as offering, "a cunning reason, rationality more rational than that of the rational man" (Foucault 1971 cited Kearney and Rainwater 1996, p.341), the madman became the patient, someone fallen prey to an illness, the cure to which was to be found in acceptance of this status as patient, physical confinement, subjection to close surveillance and behavioural change. The cruel irony that Foucault highlights is that what was (and still is) represented as the increasingly humane way in which the mad were treated served as a smokescreen that concealed the inhumanity, in terms of physical confinement, disempowerment and status, that the discipline of psychiatry brought into being.

Foucault also draws our attention to the increasingly ubiquitous nature of surveillance as a means by which power acts to regulate human behaviour in many areas of social life beyond that of the asylum. Through a discussion of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, Foucault (1991, pp.195-228) highlights the many ways in which the 'gaze' of the other, or merely the threat of it, serves to create human subjects that are, quite literally, known to themselves as observed subjects. And as with the growth of psychiatry, the omnipresence of surveillance is portrayed, paradoxically, as a progressive outgrowth of an increasingly humane social order.

Looked at this way, it seems impossible to read Foucault without being urged to rethink social formation and governance. The contradiction between the way that a discipline such as psychiatry presents itself and the way in which it actually operates surely cries out for resolution. It also seems impossible to understand the idea of the panopticon as an unseen modern archetype without wanting to challenge it or resist. Indeed, it seems as if the call to rethink social formation and

governance is necessarily contained within Foucault's account. Foucault also explicitly acknowledges that his work has a political task:

> It seems to me that the real task in a society such as ours is to criticise the workings of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them. (Foucault 1974 cited Best and Kellner 1991, p.57)

Importantly, by identifying knowledge and power relations as historically specific constructs, Foucault creates a conceptual space within which radical social change may be imagined and, hopefully, implemented. His work tells us that there is nothing natural or inevitable about any particular set of knowledge and power relations. All such structures are, to a large extent, shown to be arbitrary and therefore replaceable - good news for any would-be social reformer or revolutionary.

Unfortunately, though, things are not so simple. Foucault is immediately faced with a self-referential problem. There is, in McNay's words, an "irreconcilable tension arising from Foucault's commitment to radical politics and his intellectual investment in a theoretical relativism" (1994, p.147). If knowledge claims are to be demonstrated as historically specific, as interwoven with concrete power relations and determined by governing epistemes, then Foucault's own claims must also be viewed this way. If the knowledge claims made in numerous disciplines are to be subjected to a genealogical and archaeological critique, then so too must those made by Foucault.

Clearly aware of this possibility, Foucault consciously rejects any suggestion that the account he offers is an objective one. As Bannet states:

> He makes no secret of the point of view from which he is writing. His histories were to be 'scalpels, Molotov cocktails or minefields' as well as 'an instrument, a tactic, an illumination'. [H]e repeatedly referred to his books as fictions: "I am completely aware that I have never written anything other than fictions". (1989, p.110)

Although this allows Foucault to circumvent the charge that his approach undermines itself, it does so at a price. What appeared as a radical critique that necessarily contained within it the need for a rethink of social formation and governance, is now presented as a perspective, a "fiction", and because of this greatly impoverished epistemological status, it must inevitably be one of an infinite number of possible perspectives.

Any description of social formations and governance must, however, have an epistemological status higher than that of fiction if it is to provide the basis of a normative critique. Put simply, a problem cannot be viewed as a problem, let alone fixed, if one's description of it is merely one of an infinite number of perspectives and no means are provided by which one may tell if this particular description corresponds more closely to reality than any of the other descriptions.

It may be responded that this is precisely what Foucault wants. Does the potentially infinite number of perspectives and therefore ways of identifying problems and solutions unleash a playfulness and creativity that has some value in itself? Indeed, the "aesthetic reinvention" (McNay 1994, p.160) to which Foucault gives central place in his later works on ethics is certainly consistent with his claim to write nothing other than fiction.

Could it be that the myriad ways in which social reality may be interpreted, problematised and reinvented provide fertile ground within which genuinely radical critique may flourish? The

multiplicity of possible fictions thus allows for the transgression of currently existing power structures and for the imagination of alternative subject forms.

When viewed in this way, the claim that one interpretation of social reality has more epistemological validity than any other places an unnecessary limit on the extent to which the social order can be reimagined. Such a claim would also suggest that there is an objective epistemological vantage point, a "point of view of the universe"[1] from which one may be able to make such a comparison. And for Foucault, keen as he is on demonstrating the historically situated nature of knowledge claims, such a vantage point is of course conceptually impossible.

Any celebration at the absence of such a vantage point may, however, be premature. The creative space opened up by Foucault's talk of fiction lends itself as much to reaction as it does to emancipation. No means can be provided by which one perspective can be compared more favourably to another; a fascist narrative has just as much (or as little) value as one that is premised on a desire for human liberation.

Foucault's work is undoubtedly radical. He challenges us to look at knowledge claims, power relations and social practices in ways that conventional histories fail to do. Whilst the Molotov cocktail may be welcome and, initially at least, appear to offer genuinely revolutionary potential, the angle from which it is thrown must be arbitrary and because of this, the force of any 'illumination' is seriously undermined. Other angles, some more pleasant than others, are, necessarily, rendered equally valid. Foucault provides us with no means of distinguishing between the infinite number of fictions on offer, and, to the extent that a rethink in social formations and governance is possible, it may not be in a direction that is entirely welcome.

[1] Schultz, B. (2019). Henry Sidgwick. [online] Plato.stanford.edu. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/sidgwick [Accessed 17 Mar. 2019].

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