Dialogue on Power

Editor's Note: This text is taken from the publication *Chez Foucault*, edited by Simeon Wade and originally published in English. It was conducted between Michel Foucault and several students in Los Angeles, May 1975.

Student: I want to ask about the relation between discourse and power. If discourse is the centre for some independent power, the source of power — if source is the right word — how are we to find that source? What is the difference between what you are doing in your analysis and what the traditional phenomenological method seeks to do?
Foucault: I do not want to try to find behind the discourse something which would be the power and which would be the source of the discourse as in a phenomenological type of description or any method of interpretation. We start from the discourse as it is! In a phenomenological description you try to find out from discourse something about the speaking subject; you try to find the intentions of the thinking thought of the speaking subject from the discourse. The kind of analysis I make does not deal with the problem of the speaking subject, but looks at the ways in which the discourse plays a role inside the strategical system in which the power is involved, for which power is working. So power won't be something outside the discourse. Power won't be something like a source or the origin of discourse. Power will be something which is working through the discourse, since the discourse is itself a piece of a strategical system of the power relations. Is that clear?
Student: Suppose you write about such a system of discourse. Does the text that you write capture the power? Does it replicate or repeat the power? Would those be the words? Or would you want to say that it intends that power or meaning — has the power as its meaning?
Foucault: No, the power is not the meaning of the discourse. The discourse is a series of elements which work inside the general mechanism of power. So, you have to take the discourse as a series of events such as political events through which power is conveyed and conducted.
Student: I'm worried about the historian's text. What in fact does the historian say about the discourse of the past? What is the relation between power and the historian's text?
Foucault: I do not understand exactly why you speak of the discourse of historians. But may I take another example which for me is more familiar? The problem of madness, of discourse about madness and what has been said in certain periods about madness. I do not think the problem is to know who noted this discourse, what was the way of thinking or even perceiving madness in the consciousness of people during a particular period, but to look at the discourse about madness, the institutions about madness, the law and the legal system about madness, the way in which people were excluded since they had no jobs or since they were homosexual, etc. All these elements belong to a system of power in which discourse is only a piece related with the others. Elements which are partnerships. The analysis consists in describing the relations and the reciprocal relations between all those elements. Is that clearer?
Student: Thank You.
Student: Last night you mentioned that you have just finished a book on penal reform and legal systems, the exclusion that operated in that framework. I'm interested in knowing if you can develop a model of power in terms of the prison system. How do you see what is being done to prisoners? Is it punishment and rehabilitation?
Foucault: Well, I think that I have found the figure for this kind of power, of this system of power. I've found it very well described in Bentham's Panopticon. We can describe very generally the system of exclusion of madness in the 17th and 18th century. At the end of the 18th century society brought forth a mode of power which was not based on exclusion, as we still say, but on inclusion inside the system in which everybody should be located, surveyed, observed during the day and night, in which everybody would be linked to his own identity. You know that Bentham has dreamed of the perfect prison — well, of the kind of building which could be either a hospital or a prison or an asylum or a school or a factory — in which there will be a central tower with windows all around. Then a space with nothing in it and another building with cells all around and with windows here, and here, and here. [Foucault sketched on the blackboard a picture of Bentham's model prison.] In each of these cells there will be either a worker or a madman or a schoolboy or a prisoner. You need only one man located here in the central tower to observe exactly what they are doing all the time in these small cells. In Bentham that's the real ideal for all those guys in institutions. In Bentham I have found

the Columbus of politics. I think one finds in the Panopticon a kind of mythological motif of the new kind of power system our society uses nowadays.
Student: Do you consider yourself a philosopher or a historian?
Foucault: Neither.
Student: Isn't history the major subject of your work? What is the basis of your notion of history?
Foucault: My program has been an analysis of discourse, but not with the perspective of the 'point of view'. Nor is my program grounded in the methods of linguistics. The notion [of] structure has no meaning for me. What interests me in the problem of discourse is the fact that somebody has said something at one moment. I do not wish to stress the meaning, but the function of the fact that this thing has been spoken by somebody at this point. This is what I call the event. For me the problem is to take discourse as a series of events and to make relations and to describe relationships between these events, which we can call discursive events, with the other events in the economic system or in the political or in institutions and so on. Discourse from this point of view is nothing more than an event like the others, but of course discursive events have specific functions among the others. A similar problem is to note what constitutes the specific functions of discourse and to look at particular kinds of discourse among other ones. I also study the strategical functions of particular kinds of discursive events in a political system or in a power system. Is that enough?
Teacher: How would you describe your vision of history? How does the dimension of history come into discourse?
Foucault: Since I consider discourse as a series of events then we are automatically in the dimension of history. The problem is that for fifty years most historians have not chosen to study and describe events, but structures. There is now a kind of coming back to events in the field of history. What I mean is that in the 19th century what historians called an event was a battle, a victory, the death of a king, or something like that. Against this kind of history, the historians of colonies or societies, and so on, have shown that in history there have been a lot of permanent structures. The task of the historian was to make those structures clear. We can see that aim in France in the work of Lucien Febvre, Marc Bloch, and so on. Now historians are returning to the events and trying to note the ways we can speak of economic evolution or demographic evolution as an event.

As an example I will take a point which has been studied for many years now. The operation of birth control in the sexual life of Western society is still very enigmatic. This phenomenon is a very important event from the standpoint of economies and from the biological point of view. You know that birth control has been practiced in England and France for many centuries. Of course the practice of birth control occurred mostly among small, aristocratic circles, but it also occurred among very poor people. We know now that in the south of France and in the countryside they have practiced birth control systematically since the second half of the 18th century. That's an event.

Let's take another example. Since a particular time in the 19th century the rate of protein in food has been growing and the rate of gristle has been diminishing. This constitutes a historical, economic, and biological event. The historian is now engaged in studying these processes as new kinds of events. I think that this is something people like me have in common with historians. I am not a historian in the strict sense. But we share an interest in the event.
Student: What in this new type of historical inquiry is the place of what you call the archaeology of knowledge? Does your use of the phrase archaeology of knowledge refer to a new type of methodology or is it a simple analogy between the techniques of archeology and history?
Foucault: Let me backtrack for a moment and add something to what I was saying about the event as the main object of research. Neither the logic of meaning nor the logic of structure are pertinent for this kind of research. You don't need the theory and logic of meaning, we don't need the logic or method of structure, we need something else.
Student: I understand. Now would you comment on whether archaeology is a new method or simply a metaphor?
Foucault: Well. . .
Student: Is it central to your conception of history?
Foucault: I use the word archaeology for two or three main reasons. The first is that we can play with the word 'archaeology.' 'Arche' in Greek means beginning. We also have the word 'la arché' in French. The French word signifies the way in which discursive events have been registered and can be extracted from the archive. So archaeology refers to the kind of research which tries to dig out discursive events as if they were registered

in an arché. The second reason I use the term relates to a particular aim of mine. I wish to reconstitute a historical field in its totality with all the political, economic, sexual connections and so on. My problem is to find out what to analyse, what has been the fact itself of discourse. In this way I don't intend to be a historian but to know why and in what ways connections occur between discursive events. If I do this it is because I would like to know just what we are, nowadays. I wish to focus on what is happening with us today, what we are, what is our society. I think that our society and what we are has a deep historical dimension and in this historical space the discursive events which have taken place centuries ago or years ago, are very important. We are interwoven into those discursive events. In a way we are nothing else but what has been said, centuries and months and weeks ago and so on.

Student: It seems to me that any theory of power whether it's based on structures or functions always implies a qualitative feature. If you're going to study the structure and function of power events in a particular society, for instance, Franco's Spain or Mao's People's Republic, you have qualitatively different structures and uses of power. In that sense I think any theory of power has to address itself to its ideological underpinnings. In that sense it's very difficult to establish the kind of events or explanations about the structures or function of power apart from their political connotations. Therefore you see it's ideologically not free.

Foucault: I cannot say anything more than I agree.

Student: But if you agree don't you think this is a serious limitation on the attempt to construct a paradigm of power which is based on one's political convictions?

Foucault: That's the reason why I don't intend to depict a paradigm of what power is. I would like to note the ways different mechanisms of power are at work in our society, among us, inside us, outside us. I would like to know the ways in which our bodies, our daily behaviour, our sexual behaviour, our desire, our scientific and theoretical discourses are linked with several systems of power which are themselves linked each with one another.

Student: How would your position be different from a person who had adopted a materialist interpretation of history?

Foucault: I think that the difference is that in historical materialism you have to locate at the base of the system the political forces, then the relations of production and so on, until you find the structure, the juridical and ideological superstructure, and finally what will deepen our own thinking as well as the consciousness of poor people. I think that power relations are simpler but at the same time much more complicated. Simple in the sense that you do not need those pyramidal constructions; much more complicated since you have a lot of reciprocal relations between, for instance, the technology of power and the development of productive forces.

You cannot understand the development of productive forces unless you perceive in industry or society a particular type or several types of power at work, at work inside the productive forces. The human body is a productive force, we know that, but the human body does not exist like that, like a biological article, like a piece of material. The human body is something which exists in and through a political system. Political power gives you some room, room to behave, to have a particular attitude, to sit in a certain way, to work the whole day long and so on. Marx thought, and he has written, that work constitutes the concrete existence of man. I think that is a typical Hegelian idea. Work is not the concrete essence of man. If man works, if the human body is a productive force, it is because man is obliged to work. He is obliged to work because he is invested by political forces, because he is inserted into power mechanisms and so forth.

Student: Really what bothers me is how does this position falsify the basic Marxian premise. Marx thought that if people are obliged to work we are therefore obliged to enter into some kind of socialisation to carry out that process of production. As a consequence of this we have what is called structural relationships. If one is to understand the kind of social relationships which exist in a particular society then one has to investigate the kinds of power structures which are linked to the processes of production. And I don't think it's a determinate relationship, I mean I really think it's a reciprocal relationship, a dialectical relationship.

Foucault: I don't accept this word 'dialectical.' No, no! Let me make this very clear. As soon as you say dialectical you begin to accept, even if you don't say it, the Hegelian schema of thesis/antithesis and a kind of logic that I think is inadequate for making a real concrete description of these problems. A reciprocal relation is not a dialectical one.

Student: But if you only accept reciprocal to describe these relationships you take away any kind of contradiction. That's why I think the use of the word dialectical is important.

Foucault: Well, let's examine the word 'contradiction.' But first let me say that I am glad you have asked this question. I think it's very important. You see, the word 'contradiction' has a particular meaning in the field of logic. In the logic of propositions you really know what contradiction is. But when you look at reality and seek to describe and analyse a lot of processes, you find that those zones of reality don't contain any contradictions.

Look at the biological field. You find a lot of antagonistic reciprocal processes, but this does not mean you have found contradictions. This does not mean that one side of the antagonistic process is positive and the other negative. I think that it is really important to understand that struggle, antagonistic processes and so on do not mean contradiction in the logical sense as the dialectical point of view presupposes. There is no dialectic in nature. I beg to differ from Engels, but in nature — and Darwin has shown it very well — there are a lot of antagonistic processes, but they are not dialectical. I think that this sort of Hegelian formulation will not hold water.

If I continually insist that there are such processes as struggle, fight, antagonistic mechanism, etc., it is because you find these processes in reality. They are not dialectical ones. Nietzsche spoke a lot about these processes and even more often than Hegel. But Nietzsche described these antagonisms without reference to dialectical relations.

Student: Can we apply this to a specific concrete situation? If one considers the subject of work in industrial society let us say in relation to a worker's specific problem, is this relationship reciprocal or antagonistic or what? If I analyse my own problems in this society, do I see them as reciprocal relationships or as antagonistic relationships?

Foucault: It is neither one of the other. Now you are invoking the problem of alienation. But you see, there are a lot of things we can say about alienation. When you say 'my problems,' don't you bring in the major philosophical, the main theoretical questions, for example, what is property, what is the human subject? You said 'my' problems. Well, that would be another discussion. The fact that you have work, and that the product of work, of your work, belongs to somebody else, that's something. It's not contradiction, it's not a reciprocal combination, it's a matter of a fight, a struggle. Anyway, the fact that what you have been working at belongs to somebody else does not take on a dialectical shape. This does not constitute a contradiction. You might believe that it's morally indefensible, that you cannot bear it, that you have to struggle against this fact, yes, that's it. But this is not a contradiction, it is not a logical contradiction. And, I think that dialectical logic is really very poor, it's very easy to use it, but it's really very poor if you want to formulate very precise meanings, descriptions, and analyses of power processes.

Student: What, if any, normative concerns underlie your research?

Foucault: Is that not a question that we spoke about yesterday evening, when somebody asked me what we should do now?

Student: Well no, for example, your choice of subjects. What leads you to that choice instead of another?

Foucault: Well, that is very difficult to answer. I could answer on a personal level, I could answer on a conjunctural level, or I could try to answer on a theoretical level. I will concentrate on the second one, the conjunctural. I had a conversation with somebody yesterday evening. He said, 'You are working in such fields as madness, penal systems, etc., but all this has nothing to do with politics.' Well I think that he was right from a traditional Marxist point of view. This means that during the sixties problems like psychiatry or sexuality were considered quite marginal when they were compared to the great political problems, the exploitation of workers, for example. Among the Leftists in France and in Europe no one at that time looked at such problems as psychiatry and sexuality because they were considered marginal and unimportant. But I think that since de-Stalinisation, since the sixties, we have discovered that a lot of things that we thought [of] as unimportant and marginal are really very central in the political field because political power does not only lie in the great institutional forms of the state, what we call the state apparatus. There is no single place in which power is at work, but many places: in the family, in sexual life, in the way mad people are treated, in the exclusion of homosexuals, in the relations between men and women and so on. These are all political relations. If we want to change society we cannot do it without changing these relations. The example of the Soviet Union has been decisive. The Soviet Union is a country in which we can say that since the Revolution the relations of production have changed. The legal system of property was changed. Also the political institutions have been changed since the Revolution. But all these small and very minute power relations in the family, in sexuality, in the factory, among the workers, etc., all these relations are still in the Soviet Union what they are in other Western countries. Nothing has really changed.

Student: In your recent work on the penal code and penal system, you refer to the importance of Bentham's Panopticon. In your 'Discourse on Language' you stated that you were going to examine the effects of psychiatric discourse on the penal code. Now I'm wondering whether you consider Bentham's model prison part of psychiatric discourse or whether you just consider it evidence relating to the way psychiatric discourse influenced the penal code?
Foucault: I would say the second. That is I think that Bentham has given this kind of issue not only a figure but also a text. It was really for him a new technology of power that could be applied to mental illness as well as much else besides.
Student: Do you think then that Bentham's specific work exerted an influence of its own or was it just representative of general influences on scientific discourse?
Foucault: Of course Bentham had a huge influence, and you can really discern the effect of his direct influence. For instance, the way in which the prisons have been built and administered in Europe and in the States is derived directly from Bentham. In the beginning of the 20th century in the U.S.A., but I do not remember where, a particular prison was considered a wonderful model with certain minor modifications for a mental hospital. If it has been the case that such a dream as Bentham's Panopticon, that such a paranoid idea exerted enormous influence it was because at the same moment a new technology of power was being built up in all society. For instance, the new system of surveillance in the army, in the school the way in which children were surveyed every day by the teacher, etc. All this was happening at the same time, and the whole process can be found in the paranoid dream of Bentham. It is the paranoid dream of our society, the paranoid truth of our society.
Student: Getting back to reciprocal influences and your disillusionment with the attention that has been directed to the speaking subject, would it be incorrect to single out Bentham? Was not Bentham influenced by the practices of the schools, the army surveillance, etc., at the time. Should we not say that it is improper to focus on Bentham per se but to direct our attention to all these influences radiating out of the society?
Foucault: Yes.
Student: You said that we are obliged to work. Do we want to work? Do we choose to work?
Foucault: Yes, we desire to work, we want to work, we love to work, but work is not our essence. To say that we want to work is very different from defining our essence in terms of our desire to work. Marx said that work is the essence of man. This conception is essentially Hegelian. It is very difficult to integrate it into the class struggle in the 19th century. You might know that Lafargue, the son-in-law of Marx, wrote a small book which nobody speaks about in Marxist circles. The neglect of Lafargue's book amuses me. The indifference to it is ironic but more than ironic, it is symptomatic! He has written a book in the 19th century on man's love of leisure. For him it was really impossible to imagine that work is the essence of man. Between man and work there is no essential relation.
Student: It's something that we do.
Foucault: What's that?
Student: Work!
Foucault: Sometimes.
Student: Would you clarify the rapport between madness and the artist? Perhaps with reference to Artaud. How can we relate Artaud the madman to Artaud the artist, if we can or should?
Foucault: Really, I cannot answer this question. I would say that the single question that concerns me is why is it possible that from the end of the 18th century to the present-day madness has been for us and continues to be something related to genius, beauty, art, and so on. Why do we have this curious idea that if somebody is a great artist then there must be something mad about him? We could say the same about crime. When somebody makes something like a very beautiful crime, people don't think that he might be something of a genius, that there might be madness at work. The relation between madness and crime, and beauty and art and so on, is very enigmatic. I think that we have to try to understand why we think of these relations as something very evident. But I don't like to treat these questions directly — questions such as are artists mad, in what way are artists or criminals mad? The assumption that these relations are evident persists in our society. We treat these relations as cultural and very typical.
Student: Last night you called Sartre the last prophet. You suggested that the task for the intellectual now is to develop the tools and techniques for analysis, to understand the various ways in which power manifests itself? Are you not a prophet? Don't you predict events or the ways in which your ideas will be used?
Foucault: I am a journalist.

Student: Then are you saying that what is done with the tools and disclosures which intellectuals make is not their province? Are you suggesting that the problem of what to do with the work of intellectuals belongs to the workers, to the people? Can you not anticipate the ways in which your tools and analyses might be put to use? Can you foresee ways they might be used which you would not condone?

Foucault: No, I cannot anticipate. What I would say is that I think that we have to be very modest about the eventual political use of what we are saying and what we are doing. I do not think there is such a thing as a conservative philosophy or a revolutionary philosophy. Revolution is a political process; it is an economic process. Revolution is not a philosophical ideology. And that's important. That's the reason why something like Hegelian philosophy has been both a revolutionary ideology, a revolutionary method, a revolutionary tool, but also a conservative one. Look at Nietzsche. Nietzsche brought forth wonderful ideas, or tools if you like. He was used by the Nazi Party. Now a lot of leftist thinkers use him. So we cannot be sure if what we are saying is revolutionary or not.

This is, I think, the first thing we have to recognise. It doesn't mean that we are simply to make very beautiful, or useful, or funny tools and then choose which ones to put on the market in case somebody wants to buy them or use them. All that is fine, but there is more to it than that. If you are trying to do something, for example, to make an analysis or formulate a theory, you have to know clearly how you want it to be used, for what purposes you want to make use of the tool you are building up — you — and how you want your tools to relate to the others which are being fashioned just now. So that I think the relations between the present conjunctive situation and what you are doing within a theoretical framework is really important. You have to make these relations very clear in your own mind. You cannot make tools for any purpose, you have to make them for one purpose, but you have to realise that maybe those tools will be used in other ways.

The ideal is not to build tools, but to make bombs, because when you have used up your own bombs, nobody else can use them. And I must add that my dream, my personal dream, is not exactly to build bombs, because I don't like to kill people. I would like to write book-bombs, that means books that are useful just at the moment in which they are written or read by people. Then they would disappear. Books would be such that they would disappear soon after they have been read or used. Books should be a kind of bomb and nothing else. After the explosion people could be reminded that the books made a very beautiful fireworks display. In later years historians and others could recount that such and such a book was useful as a bomb and was beautiful as fireworks.

Well, I want to thank you very much. I have been very glad to be here and to hear and answer your questions. I have been very interested and impressed by all that you have said and what you know about my poor work. I feel that I don't deserve the attention, but I am grateful you know so much. Anyway I would really like to meet you again.