

### **Compare and contrast Karl Marx's and Michel Foucault's analysis of the concept power.**

Karl Marx was a materialist philosopher who believed that all ideas came out of life, and its conditions not from any divine being or force, like the idealist philosophers believed (Hands, 2000, P:11). This led him to present an analysis of power. According to Marx there was an underlying structure that determined social reality, and that must be grasped if social reality was to be understood. In his view the underlying structure was an economic one and its foundation is: natural resources, means of production and means of distribution. This underlying structure is "tantamount to the 'sum total of the relations of production. Furthermore, everything else in society must be built upon that foundation. The 'superstructure' is a 'reflex or a 'sublimate' of that underlying structure." (Harman, 1997, P:43) It is essentially an ideological reflection of the forces at work in the socio-economic foundation. For example, a political constitution is just a legalizing of the privileges of the social class that owns the economic foundation of society. The police are heavily armed hired toughs who administer the 'rights' of the ruling class. So called morality is the defence of these advantages. The same with most art, literature, poetry, religion and what passes for science. To elaborate on these points in greater detail one must explore Marx's teleological view of history.

Marx argued that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." (Marx. Cited in Cannadine, 2000, P:1.) History was driven forward by continuous 'social warfare'. Power is something that is seized upon by group(s) who establish themselves as dominant in society, and set up the state in terms of their own ideas, values and self-interests. The laws and principles that develop with government are presumably set up to protect 'truth', equality and justice, but in reality these are illusions put forward in order to justify and maintain the dominant group's power and control. However because this warfare is continuous one group can be overthrown by another, which then set about rewriting history, the law, rights and values in order to maintain their dominance. So for Marx, then, power is economically determined. That is to say the dominant class, in society, are the ones who hold power and thus it flows from the top down and its function is to maintain the dominance of those who own the means of production by suppressing other groups in society. The dominant class suppress other groups by exercising power in two separate ways. They sometimes use overt forms of violence that is carried out by the police or the military as in the case of the miner's strike, for example, but they maintain dominance more successfully through ideology. Art, literature, poetry, religion and science et al, makes other groups believe existing relations of exploitation and oppression, are natural and inevitable. An example of this at work would be the rise of the 'Consumer Society' and the ideological shift in describing people as 'individual consumers' rather than 'collective produces' which breaks down any sense of class solidarity. This form of power according to Freire (1993, P:58) is

....necrophilic. Based on a mechanistic, static, naturalistic, spatialized view of consciousness, it transforms (people) into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust the world, and inhabits their creative power.

Marx described those who could not see that they were oppressed as suffering from 'false consciousness'. Ideology's function is to 'mystify' the real conditions of existence, and how they might be changed, and conceals the interests it has in preventing change. In this sense Marxism can be seen as a form of structuralism, because it claims to discover the permanent hidden structure of society and thus can be perceived as 'Synchronic'. However because of its obsession with history it is also 'Diachronic'. In Arthur Miller's 'Death of a Salesman' "Willy's belief in competition, which turns the law of society into a law of nature, is an example of ideology at work." (Page, 1998.P:103) It could be argued that it is in the interests of a capitalist society to allow everyone to believe that they could succeed if only they tried harder. This will ultimately result in more productivity.

Marx believed Capitalism had actually made the class system simpler i.e. society became divided into two opposing camps: the bourgeois and the proletariat. Bourgeois ideology was false and most pertinently once the working class discovered that it was alienated it could embrace a model of liberation. Essentially the working class possessed an ambiguous identity; 'Class in itself' and 'class for itself'. 'Class in itself' was no more, or less, than the objective social categorisation of individuals who were linked together because they shared economic characteristics; the same occupations, income, wealth and interests. Only when the working class became conscious of their interests could they be described as a 'Class for itself' and said to be embracing a model of liberation by rejecting, and overthrowing, capitalism and replacing it with the new ideas of a Communist society which would be the final stage of history. A prime example of this liberation model comes from the television series the "X Files" with its central theme being the 'truth is out there'; it is the 'quest for truth' that drives the show. Eventually agent Mulder will reveal the truth: Yes we have been lied to, our postman really is an alien on holiday from Mars.

The X Files works on the notion (or suspicion) that events around the world, and people's everyday lives, are somehow controlled, or influenced, by a combination of government agencies working to repress the truth" (Horrocks, 2000.P:32)

However Foucault does not accept this view of power. While he agrees that governments exploit and repress people, while pretending to be just and fair, he claims it is more complex than identifying who are the oppressors and who are they oppressed. One needs to look beyond the linear narrative of: the bourgeois attack and subjugate the working class. Knowledge and truth are produced out of power struggles that emerged after the Renaissance. 'Regimes of truth' emerged. That is to say the type of discourse which society made function as true were constantly changing and what constituted as the truth changed across history. This is in contrast to Marx's teleological theory of history. Power was not a thing that was held, or be seized up on, by groups or individuals. It belonged to no-one. In the time of 'The Divine Rule of Kings' power did flow from the top down because the monarch was able to exercise the absolute power that s/he owned

that was a gift from God. However in the Modern ages the monarch was no longer identified as being the bearer of absolute power. God no longer decided who held power - the state through its various clusters of forces did. What characterises these power struggles between different fields, institutions bureaucracies and other groups, such as the media and other businesses, is that they are not set in stone. Power is dynamic, not static as in the Marxist sense. It flows rapidly from one position to the next and is too mobile to be grasped, or be reduced to an economic base. With this constant flow of power people's individual understanding of their own identity changes and because of this Foucault finds an identity based on class hard to accept.

Before the Renaissance there was a relative homogeneity and unity of authorised discourses. In short, there were only a few people or institutions who were authorised to, or could, communicate in a public way.-the monarchy, the church, the universities and artists. In addition, most of what was written , spoken and painted to support the status quo that is the authority of the church and monarchy. For any person, or institution, that spoke against the authorised discourses of the day the consequences could be drastic.

When 'the Enlightenment' removed the Divine King it set up, in his place, the 'empty space' of democracy; power is fluid because the site of power is empty and potentially anyone can fill 'the Emperor's clothes'. However this also gave power the opportunity to conceal itself. The reason why Mulder, from The 'X Files', can not locate the truth is because no-one can really be sure what it is. Because knowledge and information are shared across government agencies, and there is no one person who is the King who is in the centre and able to explain everything. We tend to think of the President of the United States as being the most powerful man on earth but films such as *Mars Attacks* (1996) reveal, the President is not allowed to know too much. This is in contrast to a King, or Queen, who could always know everything as s/he was the one who determined what the truth was as God's representative on earth, but in today's society there is so much information floating about on radio, television and the Internet for example. In relation to the death of President Kennedy it becomes difficult to know exactly what to believe. Was it the Mafia who killed him? Or a lone gunman? Or was he murdered by the American government? It is most probable that we will never know. So much information has been generated about the event it is impossible to get to the 'truth'. Moreover, just as information and knowledge are filtered and multiplied across culture, so is power, in a form of different system of government and regulation. "Power is a war, a war continued by other means 'that is to say' unspoken warfare (Foucault. Cited in Marshal,1993.P:585) There is not one person who can be identified as being in charge who can speak the 'truth'. It is the system that is in charge.

In the modern age there is a belief that power comes from 'the people. 'This is based on the idea the in democratic societies the people elect their leaders. However if one studies the history of the twentieth century one will find that is not a case the people holding power, or even delegating power to groups or individuals, but a case of groups becoming powerful by standing in for 'the people' , or by claiming to speak for or represent 'the people', but in a sense the people do not really exist , they are continually invented to support the causes, and claims, to power of politicians who claim to share our

hopes and aspirations, to win our support. Foucault argues that power can not be held by 'the people' anymore than it can by politicians or powerful business people. Moreover because power can not be held by groups or individuals Foucault rarely writes about *Puissance* which "designates something lasting and permanent." Instead he frequently mentions "*pouvoir* which merely denotes the action"(Aron.1964.Cited in Morris,2002.P:xvi) So "Power exists only when it is put into action".(Foucault.1982. Cited in Morris,2002.P:xvii)

Foucault agrees with Marx that power works best when it is hidden from view. We are encouraged to think that the government is working for us and keeping us safe. Foucault traced the way in which punishment was carried out up until the Renaissance period through the classical and Modern age where he highlights the difference between how power is exercised. If the King's subjects acted against him, the infamy of his crime had to be 'written', so to speak, on his body. Punishment, in this respect, was performing for his citizens both the nature of power and the consequences of opposing it. However in the Modern age, viewed these acts as wasting the resources of the state and thus what emerged was 'biopower' which was interested in increasing the wealth of the state. People were 'rewritten' to become 'docile bodies'.

Autonomous more or less produced by the technologies of power... But this is the most economic form of surveillance. Once people are 'docile they constantly check to make sure that they are not doing anything unhealthy. (Miller,1993.P76)

Although 'biopower' does act on people in a non-egalitarian way, that is some groups are abused and dominated by the workings of power, unlike Marx's concept of ideology that the ruling class are supposedly outside of its grip, it acts on everybody: the dominated as well as the dominant. Everyone to some extent is the product of 'biopower' because everyone is worked upon by discourses. The way we live within our bodies is already shaped by institutions such as the family, schools universities medical and health agencies etc; either directly (through being part of that institution) or indirectly through the circulation of discourses throughout society. Even the most dominant people in society, such as Tony Blair, do not escape the effects of being 'written' on by discourses. For example it could be argued that Bill Gate's constant drive for profit, and his obsession for corporate dominance, are the effects of him being written on by the discourse of business and economic power.

If 'biopower' is ubiquitous and effects us all then it suggests that there is very little escape from it and in this sense it achieves what it sets out to do: to control human thought and behaviour. However because of there being so many competing ideas, institutions and discourses no single authorised truth can ever emerge to dominate society. So, in a sense biopower is liberating, because one can choose a position(s) from one of many circulating through culture, but it always produces a resistance so never completely achieves its goals. Moreover the ways it produces normal, or healthy people, excludes the other which ensures opposition and resistance are built in effects. For instance a person could be classed as a deviant simply because the human sciences

produce such a category and its characteristics and consequences. The homosexual, for example, who can not control himself and thus should not serve in the armed forces. (Smart,2002.P:81) A prime example of how power produces something other than 'docile bodies' is the prison system. Foucault laments that while technologies of power, used in prisons, are supposed to produce 'compliant' bodies and behaviour but in reality the opposite happens. Prisons, in fact, function as 'criminal factories.' Prisoners become convinced that they are all the things the system says they are: 'lazy' 'scum' 'useless' etc. So the prisoners are brought together where they can exchange ideas, experiences and contacts. To put it bluntly where they can learn to become effective and efficient criminals and this is re-enforced because the prison system treats them like criminals. Zimbardo's prison experiment with randomly assigned roles of prisoner or guard, illustrates the influence of roles on attitudes and behaviour.

One can conclude by saying that Marx presented an economic analysis of power. Power was something that was owned by the dominant class, in society, who owned the means of production. It flowed from the top down and its function was to repress, but because power was static one group could be overthrown by another and thus it could be grasped by the working class when they became a 'class for themselves'. However Foucault sees history differently. He emphasises the discontinuities of history. Moreover after the removal of the 'Divine Rule of Kings' there was a change in the idea of the seat of power. Where power no longer flows from the top down but is instead owned by no-one. It can not be seized because it is dynamic that is to say it circulates throughout culture constantly moving from one position to the next. Like Marx Foucault agreed that power is more effectively exercised by hidden coercion's but he felt power was not only repressive but also positive.

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