

## ***Michael Foucault and the Disciplinary Power***

Michel Foucault, the French postmodernist, has been hugely influential in shaping understandings of power, leading away from the analysis of actors who use power as an instrument of coercion, and even away from the discrete structures in which those actors operate, toward the idea that 'power is everywhere', diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and 'regimes of truth'. Power for Foucault is what makes us what we are, operating on a quite different level from other theories.

Foucault challenges the idea that power is wielded by people or groups by way of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive. 'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure. Instead it is a kind of 'metapower' or 'regime of truth' that pervades society, and which is in constant flux and negotiation. Foucault uses the term 'power/knowledge' to signify that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and 'truth': 'Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991).

These 'general politics' and 'regimes of truth' are the result of scientific discourse and institutions, and are reinforced (and redefined) constantly through the education system, the media, and the flux of political and economic ideologies. In this sense, the 'battle for truth' is not for some absolute truth that can be discovered and accepted, but is a battle about 'the rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true'... a battle about 'the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays'(Foucault, in Rabinow 1991). This is the inspiration for Hayward's focus on power as boundaries that enable and constrain possibilities for action, and on people's relative capacities to know and shape these boundaries (Hayward 1998).

Foucault is one of the few writers on power who recognise that power is not just a negative, coercive or repressive thing that forces us to do things against our wishes, but can also be a necessary, productive and positive force in society.

'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 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production' (Foucault 1991: 194).