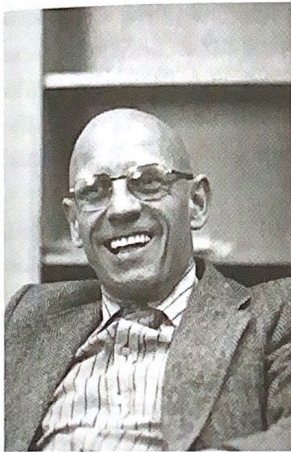


## CHAPTER 9

# Structures of Power

*Michel Foucault*



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## The Big Picture: Power

Social power is for many people an uncomfortable idea, at least in democratic settings. We like to think that democracy is more refined, more oriented toward persuasion than control. Power seems just the opposite: **Power** is “the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others” (Weber, 1922/1968, p. 926). Yet many social thinkers see power as basic to society, democratic or not. One reason for this view comes back to one

of the basic questions of sociology: social order. The problem of social order is based on the assumption that human beings are basically motivated by self-interest. Once you assume this about human nature, then social order and cooperation become problems. If all you care about is yourself, why would you cooperate with other people to achieve goals you don't care about?

One answer to the problem of social order is found in functionalist theory, which we saw in Chapter 2. The short version of this idea is that social order is achieved through commonly held norms, values, and beliefs. This approach to understanding social order is sometimes called the equilibrium model because it's based on people internalizing and believing in the collective consciousness. However, conflict theorists point out that there is an element of power underlying norms, since norms are defined as behaviors that have sanctions attached, either rewards or punishment. All norms, then, assume a distribution of power. Conflict theorists also point out that the values and beliefs commonly held in society can be explained in terms of the interests of the elite. For conflict theorists, social order is the result of constraint rather than consensus, and power is thus an essential element of society.

In his analysis, Weber connects power—the ability to get others to do what you want—with authority. Authority is the belief structure that legitimates social power and its use. Obviously, if I have a gun, I can get you to do what I want even if you don't want to, but such coercive situations aren't where social power is put into effect. Persuasion isn't specifically what Weber has in mind either. Both persuasion and coercion are based more or less on individual personalities. Persuasion works subtly as we are drawn in by the personal magnetism or interaction skills of the other person. Moreover, the willingness to use brute coercion is based on individual characteristics as well.

Weber identified two sources of social authority: party and social organization. Party is most directly related to power, but as with class and status, it isn't power itself. Party refers to a group that is focused on the acquisition of power and may represent interests based on class or status position. As Weber (1922/1968) puts it, a party organizes “in order to attain ideal or material advantages for its active members” (p. 284). The social groups that Weber would consider parties are those whose practices are oriented toward controlling an organization and its administrative staff. The Democratic and Republican Parties in the United States are obvious examples of what Weber intends. Other examples include student unions or special interest groups like the tobacco lobby, if they are oriented toward controlling and exercising power.

As implied in the conflict perspective, social organization itself creates differing levels of authority. Ralf Dahrendorf, a contemporary theorist, used Weber's idea to give a more detailed model of how this works. According to Dahrendorf (1957/1959), “social roles [are] endowed with expectations of domination or subjection” (p. 165). In other words, the legitimated use of power is found in everyday status positions, roles, and norms used to organize human action. Because of its organizational embeddedness, Dahrendorf refers to authoritative social relations as imperatively coordinated associations (ICAs). If something is imperative, it is binding and compulsory; you must do it. So the term simply says that social relations are managed through legitimated power (authority).

The insight that Dahrendorf derives is that society is intrinsically rife with potential conflict, because every one of us is a member of ICAs. The question then becomes, under what conditions does the potential for conflict become overt? Dahrendorf gives us three sets of conditions that must be met for a group to become active in conflict. The *technical conditions* are those things without which a group simply can't function: members, ideas or ideologies (what Dahrendorf calls a "charter"), and norms; the *political conditions* refer specifically to the ability to meet and organize; and the *social conditions* include the ability to communicate and the availability of structural patterns of recruitment.

There are of course other approaches to understanding power. Feminism sees power exercised through patriarchy; contemporary Marxists talk about hegemonic culture; and futurist Alvin Toffler (1991) argues that there are three kinds of power: violence, wealth, and knowledge. Violence and wealth were sources of power in previous "waves." But since the advent of postindustrial society, knowledge is becoming the most significant source of power. This idea of Toffler's follows the dictum "knowledge is power," but he gives it an explanatory base. Postindustrial economies are based on knowledge, either theoretical knowledge that leads to technological innovations or knowledge as the ability to create or use information and information technologies. Weber actually argued something similar, but he tied it to bureaucracy: Bureaucracies function on expert knowledge.

The reason I've spent this time reviewing various ways of understanding social power will become obvious: Foucault's work is about power. My point, however, may not be as obvious. Foucault's theory of power is unlike any of the above. He argues that power in modernity is exercised differently than during any other period of time. On the surface, he appears to agree with Toffler: Knowledge is power. However, there is a profound yet easily missed difference. Toffler argues that the more modern knowledge you have, the more power you will be able to exercise. Foucault argues just the opposite: The more knowledge you have and use to understand yourself and the world around you, the more subjugated you become.

## THEORIST'S DIGEST

### Brief Biography

We should begin this brief biography by noting that Foucault would balk at the idea that we need to know anything about the author in order to understand his work. Further, Foucault would say that any history of the author is something that we use in order to validate a particular reading or interpretation. Having said that, Foucault was born on October 15, 1926, in Poitiers, France. Foucault studied at the École Normale Supérieure and the Institut de Psychologie in Paris. In 1960, returning to France from teaching posts in Sweden, Warsaw, and Hamburg, Foucault published *Madness and Civilization*, for

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which he received France's highest academic degree, doctorat d'État. In 1966, Foucault published *The Order of Things*, which became a best-selling book in France. In 1970, Foucault received a permanent appointment at the Collège de France (France's most prestigious school) as chair of History of Systems of Thought. In 1975, Foucault published *Discipline and Punishment* and took his first trip to California, which came to hold an important place in Foucault's life, especially San Francisco. In 1976, Foucault published the first volume of his last major work, *The History of Sexuality*. The two other volumes of this history, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, were published shortly before Foucault's death in 1984.

### Central Sociological Questions

In Foucault's (1984/1990a) own words,

As for what motivated me. . . . It was curiosity—the only kind of curiosity, in any case, that is worth acting upon with a degree of obstinacy: not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself. After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeable and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself? (p. 8).

In brief, Foucault was interested in how ideas and subjectivities come into existence and how they limit what is possible. But Foucault's search was not simply academic, though it was that. As the above quote tells us, Foucault sought to understand his own practices "in relationship of self with self and the forming of oneself as a subject" (p. 6).

### Simply Stated

Foucault's basic premise is that human reality is language. There's an old adage that says, "There are three sides to every story: yours, mine, and the truth." Because language is human reality, Foucault would say that there are only two sides; the truth of any event or thing isn't available to humans because of our deep dependence on and use of language. This implies that any claim to represent the truth (such as my trying to convince you that my story is the right one) is an expression of power. Social power is expressed and imposed through what passes as legitimated knowledge, which orders the world around us, and through discourse, which orders our subjective positions. Modernity brought with it a specific kind of power in that the individual disciplines himself or herself—modern power is practiced from within. Modern power is also distinct in that the person is objectified by these internal practices.

### Key Ideas

Truth games, counter-histories, archaeology, genealogy, episteme, discourse, governmentality, objectification, panopticon, microphysics of power, medical gaze

## Concepts and Theory: The Truth About Truth

The truth about truth is that it is used to exercise power. Thus, Foucault's interest in truth isn't abstract or philosophical. Rather, Foucault is interested in analyzing what he calls *truth games*. His use of "games" isn't meant to imply that what passes as truth in any historical time is somehow false or simply a construction of language. Foucault feels that these kinds of questions can only be answered, let alone asked, after historically specific assumptions are made. In other words, something can only be "false" once a specific truth is assumed; Foucault is involved in uncovering *how* truth is assumed. Specifically, Foucault's interest in truth concerns the game of truth: the rules, resources, and practices that go into making something true for humans.

The idea of practice is fairly broad and includes such things as institutional and organizational practices as well as those of academic disciplines—in these practices, truth is formed. The idea also refers to specific practices of the body and self—these are where power is exercised. Most of us use the word *practice* to talk about the behaviors we engage in to prepare for an event, like band practice for a show. But practice has another meaning as well. This meaning is clear when we talk about a medical practice. When you go to your physician, you see someone who is "practicing" medicine. In this sense, practice refers to choreographed acts that interact with bodies—sets of behaviors that together define a way of doing something. This is the kind of practice in which Foucault is interested.

### Uncovering Truth

Foucault uncovered truth games by constructing what he called *counter-histories*. When most of us think of history, we think of a factual telling of events from the past. We are aware, of course, that sometimes that telling can be politicized, which is one reason we have "Black History Month" here in the United States—we are trying to make up for having left people of color out of our telling of history. But most of us also think that the memory model is still intact; it's just getting a few tweaks. Foucault wants us to free history from the model of memory. He really doesn't say anything directly about whether any particular history is more or less true; that's not an issue for him. History in all its forms is part of and generated by discourse. Thus, Foucault's concern is how the idea of true history is used. What Foucault wants to produce for us is a counter-history—a history told from a different point of view from the progressive, linear, memory model.

The important questions then become, why is one path taken rather than another? Why is the present filled with one kind of discourse rather than others? And what has been the cost of taking this path rather than all the other potentialities? Thus, a counter-history identifies the following:

the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents. (Foucault, 1984, p. 81)

Foucault uses two terms to talk about his counter-history, archaeology and genealogy. Though the distinctions are sometimes unclear, *archaeology* seems to be oriented toward uncovering the relationships among social institutions, practices, and knowledge that come to produce a particular kind of discourse or structure of thought. *Genealogy* may be better suited to describe Foucault's (1984[??]) work that is concerned with the actual inscription of discourse and power on the mind and body: "Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (p. 83). We could say that archaeology is to text what genealogy is to the body. In both cases, there is an analogy to digging; searching; and uncovering the hidden history of order, thought, madness, sexuality, and so on. The hidden history isn't necessarily more accurate—it's simply a counter-story that is constructed more in an archaeological mode than a historical one.

### Why So Critical?

What is Foucault's point in constructing counter-histories? Part of what he wants to do is expose the contingencies of what we consider reality, but to what end? Many critical perspectives are based on assumptions of what would make a better society. In other words, there must be something to which the current situation is compared to demonstrate what it is lacking. But Foucault sees it otherwise. For him, *the critical perspective in itself is sufficient because it opens up possibilities*. In fact, Foucault would argue that a utopian scheme only attempts to replace one system of impoverishment with another. The point is to keep possibilities always open, to keep people critically examining their life and knowledge system so that they can perpetually be open to the possibility of something else.

According to Foucault's scheme, an important part of what creates knowledge, order, and discourse is the presence of "blank spaces." Foucault (1966/1994b) pictures knowledge as a kind of grid. The boxes in the grid are the actual linguistic categories, like mammal, flora, mineral, human, black, white, male, and female. We are familiar with those parts of the grid; they form part of our everyday language. However, there is actually a more important part of the grid: the part that creates the order—the blank spaces between the categories. "It is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression" (p. xx). The true power of a discourse or knowledge system is in the spaces between the categories. As Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) notes,

Separating one island of meaning from another entails the introduction of some mental void between them. . . . It is our perception of the void among these islands of meaning that makes them separate in our mind, and its magnitude reflects the degree of separateness we perceive among them. (pp. 21–22)

These spaces are revealed most clearly in transgression. As an illustration, let's think about a little boy of about 3 or 4 years of age. He is playful, playing with the toys he's

been given and emulating the role models he sees on TV and among the neighborhood children. But one day his father comes home and finds him playing with dolls. His father grabs the doll away and tells his son firmly that boys do not play with dolls. In this instance, the category of gender was almost invisible until the young boy unwittingly attempted to cross over the boundary or space between the categories. The meaning and power of gender waited “in silence for the moment of its expression.”

This idea of space is provocative. A more Durkheimian way of thinking about categories would conceptualize the space between them as a boundary or wall. Using the idea of boundary to think about the division between categories is fruitful: Walls separate and prevent passing. The young boy in our example certainly came up against a wall, and many of us have felt the walls of gender, race, or sexism. But the idea of walls makes the use of categories and knowledge seem objective, as if they somehow exist apart from us, and this is not what Foucault has in mind.

Notice that the boy in our example was unaware of the “wall” until his father showed it to him. From Foucault’s position, the wall of gender was erected in the father’s gendered practices. Foucault’s idea of space helps us think about the practices of power. Space, in this sense, is empty until it is filled—seeing space between categories rather than a wall makes us wait to see what will go there and how it goes there. Space is undetermined. Something can be built in space, but the space itself calls our attention to potential. Foucault’s research, his critical archaeology, fills in that potential—he tells us how that space became historically constructed in one way rather than any of the other potential ways.

Foucault’s counter-history actually creates a space of its own. On one side, Foucault’s archaeology of modernity uncovers the fundamental codes of thought that establish for all of us the order that we will use in our world. On the other side, Foucault sets the sciences and philosophical interpretations that explain why such an order exists. Between these two domains is a space of possibilities, a space wherein a critical culture can develop that sufficiently frees itself “to discover that these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones” (Foucault, 1966/1994b, p. xx).

In other words, through the archaeology of knowledge, Foucault wants to not only expose the codes of knowledge that undergird everything we do, feel, and think; he also wants to set loose the idea that things might not be as they appear. He wants to free the possibility of thinking something different. That possibility of thought exists in the critical space between—but in this case the space isn’t specified, as it is in already existing orders. Foucault doesn’t necessarily have a place he is taking us; he doesn’t really have a utopian vision of what knowledge and practice ought to be. His critique is aimed at freeing knowledge and creating possibility; it’s aimed at creating an empty space that is undetermined.

## Concepts and Theory: The Practices of Power

According to Foucault, power isn’t something that a person possesses, but it is something that is part of every relationship. Foucault tells us that there are three types of domains or practices within relationships: communicative, objective, and

power. Communication is directed toward producing meaning; objective practices are directed toward controlling and transforming things—science and economy are two good examples; and practices of power, which Foucault (1982) defines as “a set of actions upon other actions” (p. 220), are directed toward controlling the actions and subjectivities of people. Notice where Foucault locates power—it’s *within the actions themselves*, not within the powerful person or the social structure. Foucault uses the double meaning of “conduct” to get at this insight: Conduct is a way of leading others (to conduct an orchestra, for example) and also a way of behaving (as in “Tommy conducted himself in a manner worthy of his position”). Thus, we conduct others through our conduct.

However, Foucault’s intent is not to reduce power to the mundane, the simple organization of human behavior across time and place. Rather, Foucault’s point is that power is exercised in a variety of ways, many of which we are unaware. Power, then, becomes insidious. Power acts in the normalcy of everyday life. It acts by imperceptible degrees, exerting gradual and hidden effects. In this way, the exercise of power entices us into a snare that feels of our own doing. But how is power exercised? Where does it exist, and how are we enticed? Foucault argues that power is exercised through the epistemes (underlying order) and discourses found in what passes as knowledge. The potential and practice of power exists in these epistemes and discourses that set the limits of what is possible and impossible, which in turn are felt and expressed through a person’s relationship with himself or herself, in subjectivities—the way we feel about and relate to our inner self—and the disposition of the body.

## The Power of Order

Order is an interesting idea. We order our days and lives; we order our homes and offices; we order our files and our bank accounts; we order our yards and shopping centers; we order land and sea—in short, humans order everything. *How* do we order things? One of the ways is linguistically: “Indeed, things become meaningful only when placed in some category” (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 5). But a deeper and more fundamental question can be asked: How do we order the order of things? In other words, what scheme or system underlies and creates our categorical schemes? We may use categories to order the world around us, but where do the categories get their order?

To introduce us to this question, Foucault (1966/1994a) tells a delightful story of reading a book that contains a Chinese categorical system that divides animals into those

(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (p. xv)

The thing that struck Foucault about this system of categories was the limitation of his own thinking—“the stark impossibility of thinking *that*” (p. xv). In

response, Foucault asks an important set of questions: What determines the boundaries of what is possible and impossible to think? Where do these boundaries originate? What is the price of these impossibilities—what is gained and what is lost?

Foucault argues that there is a fundamental code to culture, a code that orders language, perception, values, practices, and all that gives order to the world around us. He calls these fundamental codes epistemological fields or the episteme of knowledge in any age. **Episteme** refers to the mode of thought's existence, or the way in which thought organizes itself in any historical moment. An episteme is the necessary precondition of thought. It is what exists before thought and that which makes thought possible. This foundation of thought is not held consciously. It is undoubtedly this preconscious character of the episteme that makes thought believable and ideas seem true.

Further, rather than seeing thought and knowledge as results of historical, linear processes, Foucault argues that discontinuity marks changes in knowledge. Most of us think that the knowledge we hold accumulated over time, that we have thrown out the false knowledge and replaced it with true knowledge as we progressively learned how things work. This evolutionary view of knowledge actually comes from the culture of science. It is the way we want to see our knowledge, but not necessarily the way it is. Foucault argues that knowledge doesn't progress linearly. Rather, what we know and how we know it are linked to historically specific patterns of behavior, institutional arrangements, and economic and social practices that set the rules and conditions of discourse and the limits of our possibilities. That historical path is marked by rupture: discontinuities and sudden, radical changes.

Foucault is saying that this idea of rupture implies that knowledge and truth are purely functions of institutional arrangements and practices and not the result of any real quest for truth. Thus, what counts as truth in any age—our own included—comes about through historically unique practices and institutional configurations. This implies not only that knowledge is socially constructed, but also, and more importantly, that *knowledge is nothing more and nothing less than the exercise of power*. This pure power is put into effect through discourse and the taken-for-granted ordering of human life.

## The Power of Discourse

**Discourse** is perhaps the most powerful analytical concept to come out of Foucault's work and poststructuralism. The word itself comes from a Latin word meaning "argument" or "running about," specially running a course. Both definitions imply a specified path and set of practices or ways of doing something. Making arguments and running races don't take place haphazardly. Arguments and races are planned in advance, occur according to known sets of rules, and limit what the people involved can do. If you're running a marathon, for example, you can't just decide to take a short cut and win the race. You'd be disqualified. Arguments are like that as well. In fact, the rules of writing an argument are specific to academic

disciplines. As an undergraduate, I turned in a paper for a sociology class that was returned with the comment, "This is more a philosophy of education paper rather than sociology of education." Ironically, after I'd completed my PhD in sociology, I took a philosophy class just because I was interested. In that class, the professor told me my papers weren't written according to the rules of philosophical argumentation. After training my mind to think like a sociologist, I had trouble thinking philosophically.

To understand Foucault's use of discourse, it's helpful to contrast his general approach to culture with two others: structuralist and hermeneutic (the leading approaches before Foucault's work). A *hermeneutic approach* to culture looks to understand the diverse meanings culture can have for people in different contexts. Sometimes the differences are obvious, such as the diverse meanings that the American flag can have. But it's in the more subtle differences that the hermeneutic approach becomes clear. Clifford Geertz (1973), an anthropologist, gives us a good example through the use of *thick descriptions*, accounts of social phenomena that are microscopic in detail. Geertz gives us the problem of the eye twitch versus the wink. The difference between the two cannot be photographed, but the differences in meaning are vast—a twitch can be virtually meaningless while the wink can be flirtatious. But there's more: The twitch or the wink may be parodied, in which the physical action is neither a wink nor a twitch. Further still, the parody may be practiced—it is then not a wink or twitch or parody. In order to understand the differences between the wink and the twitch and all of the ways that they may be framed, thick descriptions must be used to get at the meaning of the behavior to the actors in the situation. Geertz refers to the thick descriptions and their layers of meaning as "piled-up structures of inference and implication" (p. 7).

A *structuralist approach*, on the other hand, looks at the underlying foundations of culture and argues that structure causes or strongly influences meanings and practices. In other words, the cultural meanings that matter aren't left to individual interpretation. Meanings are set or shaped, usually through binary opposition. The clearest example is the binary good and evil; one cannot exist without the other, and thus they mutually constitute one another. Further, because they are set in opposition, they are mutually exclusive. If something is evil, it is by definition not good. Émile Durkheim's work in the area of religion is based on this sort of binary structure: the sacred and profane. Durkheim is generally seen as a founding thinker in the structuralist paradigm. In Chapter 13, we'll take a look at Jeffrey Alexander's understanding of civil society; it is a moderate Durkheimian version of structuralism. He argues that the binary categories of democracy create the discourses and practices found in any empirical civil society. Binary oppositions concerning motivations, relationships, and institutions are used to categorize civil and anti-civil, and thus determine or strongly inform the production of democratic meanings.

In Foucault's hands, culture isn't something that should simply be understood, nor is it deterministically guided by an underlying structure. Rather, cultural meanings, specifically knowledge, are *created and regulated* by historical conditions and

rules of discourse. Discourses have rules that limit cultural practices and the kinds of things we can think and know. Recall the above quote: What struck Foucault about the Chinese encyclopedia is that it was impossible for him to conceive of a world divided by those categories. All discourses seem logical from the inside point of view, but are often seen as bizarre by an outsider. I once had a person describe to me a religion with Middle Eastern roots that had cannibalistic practices. The idea was appalling to my Westernized mind—that is, until he told me he was describing Christian Communion, when believers partake of the blood and body of Jesus. For believers, Communion makes sense within the discourse of Christianity, but it can look rather strange from the outside.

In addition to circumscribing what we know, discourses set up subjective positions. In the example I just gave, the discourse of Christianity creates a position wherein the subject “Christian” exists. To be a Christian, then, it is necessary to feel, think, and act in specific ways. In using this example, it’s important to note that there are particular discourses within the broader category of Christianity. These more specific discourses often run along denominational lines that include some “Christians” and exclude others. Some Christian discourses, for example, categorize Jehovah’s Witnesses as a cult and thus deny the subjective position of “Christian” to its members. The more fundamental a given discourse, the more specific (and closely guarded) are its qualifications for inclusion.

Let’s use the more general example of gender. The discourse of gender determines the position a person must occupy in order to become the subject of a statement such as “I’m a man.” For me to be a man, I must meet the conditions of existence that are set down in the discourse of gender. I not only have to meet those conditions for you; I must meet them for me as well, because the discourse sets out the conditions of subjectivity, how we think and feel about our self. Subjects, and the accompanying inner thoughts and feelings, are specific conditions within the discourse. As we locate ourselves within a discourse, we become subject to the discourse and thus subjectively answer ourselves through the discourse.

Discourse delineates what is possible and impossible for us to think, and it sets up subjective positions—symbolic spaces wherein a subject can exist. As such, discourse is an expression of power. We can look at Foucault’s notion of power in two ways, one fairly obvious and the other less so. The more obvious instances are in such social categories of race and gender, which we touched on in Chapter 7. In the conclusion of this book, we’ll talk about another obvious example: colonization. The colonizing efforts of Europe were legitimated by a discourse that Stuart Hall (1996a) characterizes as “the West and the Rest.”

Of course, most modern nations are built upon various nationalisms, which are the same sort of discourse in that they create absolute meaning with strict inclusion and exclusion rules that determine subjective positions. In answer to the question, what is a nation, French writer Ernest Renan wrote, “a nation is . . . a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those one is prepared to make in the future” (quoted in McCrone, 2006, p. 117). Note the power of these subjective positions. They provide meaning that transcends an individual’s life: “The enduring attraction of war is this: Even

with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living" (Hedges, 2002, p. 3).

These instances of power in discourse are obvious because they clearly are about one group exercising power over another. Foucault is actually more interested in the other, less obvious exercise of power. It's the power that is exercised in the taken-for-granted knowledge of our day. Even here, there are more and less obvious examples. Dorothy E. Smith gives us an example that is fairly easy to see in Chapter 16. Smith details how scientific knowledge in sociology denies the subjective experiences of women. Here the discourse of "sociology as science" determines legitimate forms of knowledge and denies all others. Legitimated knowledge in sociology is objective, determined by data and statistical analysis. This sort of knowledge subjugates and denies women's lived experiences. Patricia Hill Collins will make this same sort of argument in Chapter 15 about the intersection of race and gender.

Again, this isn't Foucault's main concern with discourse, though it is closer to the heart of it. The power of discourse that concerns Foucault the most is the power that we exercise over ourselves by using legitimated knowledge to bring our lives under its dominion. Let me give you a brief example. When I was growing up, my parents smoked cigarettes. In fact, almost everybody smoked cigarettes. When I came to my present university in 1995, cigarette smoking had just a few years prior been forbidden within the buildings. Previously, professors would commonly sit at their desks smoking. About 5 years ago, the university decided that it would become a smoke-free campus. This is happening in stages. The university first drew lines around the building doors that kept smokers 25 feet away from the entrances. Three years ago, the university implemented a change in employee health insurance benefits. In order to get the best plan, an employee was required to sign a form stating that he or she did not use tobacco products of any kind. Otherwise, the employee was forced to take an inferior plan, with a higher deductible and lower percentages and lifetime limits paid. This practice is becoming increasingly common and is being extended to such issues as bodyweight. Employers are also putting greater emphasis on overall preventative health care, providing greater benefits for those who are proactive in establishing a healthy lifestyle. In response to such measures, people are smoking less, monitoring their diet and drinking habits, participating in some form of exercise, and so on.

I've used this example many times in class and I usually get a common response: "But smoking is bad for you, and people should take care of themselves!" This is why understanding Foucault is tricky: We believe in the knowledge we hold. Remember the truth about truth we talked about previously. For Foucault, truth is a game that is played by specific rules. Foucault is interested in the rules because absolute truth is either an abstract philosophical concept or a matter of faith. Foucault has demonstrated empirically, through his counter-histories, that knowledge doesn't progress in a linear manner. In other words, it isn't the case that humanity is on the path of progressive knowledge and people were wrong in the past only because they didn't know enough—and, obviously, we're right today because we do. That's a belief of the Enlightenment, which we looked at in Chapter 1. Changes in knowledge happen in ruptures, relatively sudden breaks from the past. The breaks can't

be attributed to discoveries, but rather, to changing social practices. This understanding of knowledge isn't unique to Foucault. In fact, many philosophers of science would agree (see Paul Feyerabend, 1988; Thomas Kuhn, 1970).

In Foucault's theory, then, discourse "constructs, defines and produces the objectives of knowledge in an intelligible way while excluding other forms of reasoning as unintelligible" (Barker, 2008, p. 90). Further, discourse creates subjective positions that people occupy and are thus a way in which individuals exercise control over themselves and others.

## The Power of Objectification

For Foucault, then, power is not so much a quality of social structures as it is the practices or techniques that become power as individuals are turned into subjects through discourse. Foucault intends us to see both meanings of the noun *subject*: as someone to control, and as one's self-knowledge. Here, Foucault's unique interest is quite clear: Perhaps the most insidious form of power is that which is exercised by our self over how we think and feel; it is the power we exercise in the name of others over our self.

In an interesting analysis, Foucault uses the state to illustrate both meanings of subject. State rule is usually understood in terms of power over the masses. While this is a true characteristic of the state, Foucault argues that the modern state also exercises individualization techniques that exert power over the subjectivity of the person. Foucault talks about this form of ruling as *governmentality*: "The government of the self by the self in its articulation with relations to others" (Foucault, 1989, as quoted in Davidson, 1994, p. 119). Governmentality was needed because of the shift from the power of the monarch to the power of the state.

Under a monarchy, the power of the queen or king was absolute, and he or she required absolute obedience, but the scope of that control was fairly narrow. The nation-state "freed" people from the coercive control of the monarchy but at the same time broadened its scope of control. The nation-state is far more interested in controlling our behaviors today than monarchies were 300 years ago. In governmentality, the individual is enlisted by the state to exercise control over himself or herself. This is partly achieved through expert, professional knowledge that comes from medicine and the social and behavioral sciences. The state supports such scientific research, and the findings are employed to extend control, particularly as the individual uses and consults medicine, psychology, and other sciences.

A fundamental part of Foucault's argument about the practices of power is the historical shift to *objectification*. Obviously, if power is intrinsic to human affairs of all kinds, then people have always exercised power. However, the practice of power became something different and more insidious due to historical changes that objectified the subject of power. We are all probably familiar with the transitive verb *to objectify*. It means to make something an object that isn't an object, and it also means to exist apart from any internal relationship. Interestingly, most of us are probably not familiar with the transitive verb *to subjectify*. As a case in point, my word processor just highlighted "subjectify" as a misspelled word, yet it is a real

word that appears in exhaustive dictionaries. We just rarely use the word, nor do we think about things becoming subjectified—we assume that we subjectively relate to everything about ourselves. But, according to Foucault, that is not the case in modernity. Today, we relate to our self, our body, and our sexuality as objects.

Foucault produced a series of books that provide a counter-history to some of the objectifying power practices found in Western societies. These books detail madness and rationality, abnormality and normality, medicine and the clinic, penal discipline and punishment, psychiatry and criminal justice, and the history of sexuality. In general, these works document how you and I exercise power over our bodies and subjectivities. While I don't have the luxury of introducing you to all of Foucault's archaeology and genealogy, it is important for us to talk about a few of his concepts so that you can get a sense of how Foucault's theoretical ideas get played out. We'll first be looking at how power is exercised over our body and then over our inner, subjective life.

## Concepts and Theory: Disciplining the Body

Foucault's intent in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1995) was to map a major shift in the way in which Western society handles crime and criminals. The shift is from punishment and torture to discipline. Foucault paints a graphic comparative picture in the first seven pages of this book. The first part of the picture is an account of the public torture and killing of a man named Damiens on March 2, 1757. Damiens had been convicted of murder and sentenced to having his flesh torn from his body with red-hot pincers, followed by various molten elements (such as lead, wax, and oil) poured into the open wounds. The hand that held the knife with which he had committed the murder was burnt with sulfur. Finally, he was drawn and quartered by four horses, his body burnt to ashes, and the ashes scattered to the winds.

The second image in Foucault's picture is a set of 12 rules for the daily activities of prisoners in Paris. The rules covered the prisoners' entire day and included such things as prayer, Bible reading, education, bathing, recreation, and work. These rules were in use a mere 80 years after the public torture of Damiens. The shortness of the time period indicates that the change wasn't due to gradual adjustment and progress, but rather to abrupt shifts in knowledge, perception, and power.

Foucault uses this graphic comparison to point out a fundamental change that occurred in Europe and the United States. Most of us would look at these differences and attribute the change to a dawning of compassion and a desire to treat people more humanely. Foucault, on the other hand, looks deeper and more holistically at the shift. This change not only affected the penal system; it was a fundamental social change as well. During this period of time, from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries (also known as the Enlightenment), science gained its foothold in society. Society as a whole began to embrace what we call *scientism*—the adaptation of the methods, mental attitudes, and modes of expression typical of scientists. Scientism values control, and control is achieved by objectifying the world and reducing it to

its constituent parts. The gaze of the scientist is thus penetrating, particularizing, and objectifying. This kind of gaze results in universal technologies that allow humans to regularize and routinize their control of the world.

The shift, then, was not due to society becoming more compassionate and humane; the shift from punishment to discipline was a function of scientism and the desire to more uniformly control the social environment. As Foucault (1975/1995) says, the primary objective of this shift was

to make of the punishment and repression of illegalities a regular function, coextensive with society; not to punish less, but to punish better; to punish with an attenuated severity perhaps, but in order to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the *power to punish more deeply into the social body*. (p. 82, emphasis added)

This new way of discipline and control is best characterized by Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. The word **panopticon** is a combination of two Greek words. The first part, "pan," comes from the word *panos*, meaning "all." The second part comes from the word *optikos*, meaning "to see." Together, panopticon literally means "all-seeing." There is actually an optical instrument called the panopticon that combines features of both the microscope and telescope, allowing the viewer to see things both up close and far away, thus seeing all.

Jeremy Bentham developed a different kind of panopticon—a building for prisons. Bentham's panopticon was a round building with an observation tower or core that optimized surveillance. The building was divided into individual prison cells that extended from the inner core to the outer wall. Thus, each cell had inner and outer windows; each prisoner was backlit by the outer window, allowing for easy viewing. "They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 200). The tower itself was fitted with venetian blinds, zigzag hallways, and partitioned intersections among the observation rooms in the tower. These made the tower guards invisible to the prisoners who were being observed. The purpose of the panopticon was to allow seeing without being seen. Here "inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere" (p. 195).

Foucault isn't really interested in the panopticon as such. He sees the idea of the panopticon as illustrative of a shift in the fundamental way people thought and the way in which power is practiced. In terms of crime and punishment, it involved a shift from the spectacle of torture (which fit well with monarchical power) to regulation in prison (which fits well with the nation-state); from seeing crime as an act against authority to an act against society; from being focused on guilt (did he or she do it?) to looking at cause (what social or psychological factors influenced the person?); and, most importantly, from punishment to discipline—more specifically, to the self-discipline imposed by the ever-present but unseen surveillance of the panopticon.

Foucault (1975/1995) refers to this kind of control as the *microphysics of power* and sees this as the explicit link between knowledge and power: "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any

knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (p. 27). The microphysics of power is exercised or practiced as knowledge is produced, appropriated by groups for use, distributed to the population through education and mass media (such as books, magazines, and the Internet), and then retained internally by those that others want to control.

### The Disciplines of the Human Sciences

Obviously, all of society was not put into a physical panopticon, but society was placed within a symbolic or institutional system of surveillance. In another word play, Foucault argues that the discipline associated with panopticon surveillance of the entire population comes from the disciplines, in particular the human sciences. The modern episteme created the possibility of the human sciences, such as psychiatry, psychology, and sociology. The human has been the subject of thought and modes of control for quite some time, but in every case the human was seen holistically or as part of the universal scheme of things. In the modern episteme, however, mankind becomes the object of study, not as part of an aesthetic whole, but as a thing in its own right.

This discourse of science serves to objectify and control the individual. Psychiatry and psychology used the mechanical model of the universe to gaze inside the psyche of the person; sociology and political science looked at the external circumstances of humanity. Thus, both the internal motivations and reasons behind action as well as the external factors became the objects of science in order to fulfill its chief goal, which is control. Statistics are used to quantify and categorize; psychotherapy and psychological testing are used to probe and catalog. All of the disciplines and their methodologies are brought into "discipline" in order to fulfill this primary goal of control.

Foucault (1982) finds the human sciences particularly interesting because they are "modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of sciences" (p. 208). The human sciences are thus not true science; they only take on the guise of science. The human sciences did not grow out of scientific questions; they grew out of the modern episteme. Simply put, during the time that people began to talk about society and psychology, the kind of knowledge that was seen as real and valuable was science. So, in order to be accepted, the social and behavioral disciplines had to take on the guise of science.

More specifically, Foucault argues that there are three areas of knowledge in the modern episteme: mathematical and physical sciences, life and economic sciences, and philosophy. The human sciences grew out of the space created by these three knowledge systems. Asking scientific questions about things like biology and physics, which have some basis in the objective world, set the stage for those same questions to be asked about the questioner. Further, each of these sciences pursues knowledge in a distinctive manner, each with its own logic. The human sciences, on the other hand, must borrow from each of these because they have no unique domain or methodology. The human sciences stand in

relation to all the other forms of knowledge . . . at one level or another, [they use] mathematical formalization; they proceed in accordance with models or

concepts borrowed from biology, economics, and the sciences of language; and they address themselves to that mode of being of man which philosophy is attempting to conceive. (Foucault, 1966/1994b, p. 347)

Therefore, the precariousness or uncertainty of the human sciences isn't due to, "as is often stated, the extreme density of their object" (Foucault, 1966/1994b, p. 348); rather, their uncertainty of knowledge is due to the fact that they have no true method of their own—everything is borrowed. The validity of knowledge is in some way always related to methodology. What we know is an effect of how we know it. Because the human sciences don't have their own methodology, the knowledge generated is without any basis—in the end, it is purely an expression of power that can be explicitly used by the state to control populations, but is more generally part of the control people exercise over themselves in modernity.

As such, we generally see and understand ourselves in Western cultures from the human science model. We listen endlessly to public opinion polls and voting predictions, and they become constant topics of conversation for us. Our bookstores, magazine racks, and Internet chat rooms are filled with ever-increasing numbers of self-help books, advice, and groups, respectively. We understand the family in terms of such psychosocial models as "the functional family," and we raise our children according to the latest findings. Almost everything that we think, feel, and do is scrutinized by a human science, and we are provided with that knowledge so that we, too, can understand our own life and its circumstances.

### The Discipline of Medicine

But the human sciences are not alone in their objectification of humanity; they are aided by a culture produced by the *medical gaze*. The modern medical gaze is different from that of the eighteenth century. At that time, disease was organized into hierarchical categories such as families, genera, and species. In some ways the patient was superfluous to the disease. The doctor's gaze, then, was directed not so much at the patient as at the disease. Diseases transferred to the body when their makeup combined with certain qualities of the patient, like the person's temperament. Symptoms existed within the disease itself, not the patient. This way of seeing where symptoms live implies that the patient's body could actually get in the way of the doctor seeing the symptoms. For example, if the patient was old, then the symptoms associated with being elderly could obscure the doctor's view of the symptoms associated with the disease. The medical gaze was thus directed at the disease, not the body.

However, by the nineteenth century, the modern medical gaze had come to locate disease within the patient. Disease was no longer seen to exist within its own world apart from the body; from this new clinical point of view, disease is located within the body and is constituted by its symptoms. The patient can't get in the way of the symptoms; the symptoms and disease are the same and exist within the body. This shift in discourse created the clinical gaze, an objectifying way of seeing that looks within and dissects the patient. With the clinical gaze, "Western man could constitute himself in his own eyes as an object of science" (Foucault, 1963/1994a, p. 197).

Modern medicine was thus created through a gaze that makes the body an object, a thing to be dissected, either symbolically or actually, in order to find the disease within it. The culture of the clinical gaze helped to create a general disposition in Western society to see the person as an object. This disposition, along with the human sciences, made the practices of power much more effective and treacherous—objects that can be thrown away are much easier to control than subjects who demand continuing emotional and psychic connections.

## Disciplining Sex

Thus, bodily regimens of exercise and diet, self-understanding and regulation of feelings and behaviors, all stem from medicine and the human sciences, which Foucault tells us make up the panopticon of modernity. But Foucault is interested in something deeper than the control of the body—he wants to document how we as individuals exercise social power over the way we relate to our own selves. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Foucault's counter-history of sexuality. In order to understand Foucault's intent, we will now briefly review Greek and modern ideas of sexuality.

### *Greek Sexuality*

Ancient Greece was the birthplace of democracy and Western philosophy. There was, in fact, a connection between democracy and philosophy. In Athens, in response to an upheaval by the masses against their tyrannical leader, a politician named Cleisthenes introduced a completely new organization of political institutions called democracy (the rule of common people). Through democratic elections, the elite incrementally lost their advantage in the assemblies and the common people ruled. Unfortunately, the masses were susceptible to impassioned speech and ended up making several decisions that conflicted with one another or entailed high costs. This series of crises created a desire in the elite for absolutes: What are the truths upon which all decisions and governance should be based? Truth obviously couldn't be found simply through rhetoric; they believed that there had to be some absolutes upon which decisions could be based.

Along with other factors, this impetus helped produce the Greek notion of the soul. For the Greek, the idea of the soul captured all that is meant by the inner person: his or her mind, emotions, ethics, beliefs, and so on. But in reading Plato, it's also clear that the soul was seen to be hierarchically constructed. Within the soul, the mind is preeminent and alone is immortal. The emotions and appetites, though part of the soul, are lesser and mortal. Thus, reason is godlike and education, especially philosophy, is important for proper discipline.

It is important that we see the emphasis here. The mind, emotions, and bodily appetites are viewed hierarchically, but they are all seen as part of the soul. In order to get a sense of the relationships within the soul, let's take a look at a conversation that Plato sets up between Socrates and a group of students in the third or fourth century BC. Socrates speaks first:

“Do you think that it's a philosopher's business to concern himself with what people call pleasures—food and drink, for instance?”

“Certainly not, Socrates,” said Simmias.

“What about those of sex?”

“Not in the least.” . . .

“Then it is your opinion in general that a man of this kind is not preoccupied with the body, but keeps his attention directed as much as he can away from it and towards the soul?”

“Yes, it is.” . . .

“Then when is it that the soul attains to truth? When it tries to investigate anything with the help of the body, it is obviously liable to be led astray.”

“Quite so.”

“Is it not in the course of reasoning, if at all, that the soul gets a clear view of reality?”

“Yes.” (Plato, 1993, pp. 117–118)

Notice how Socrates views sex: It isn’t something set aside and special. It is simply seen as a bodily appetite, on a par with eating and drinking. These aren’t a direct concern for the philosopher—they are only of indirect concern. If the bodily appetites get in the way of the search for reality or truth, then they are of concern, but only then. The point is to keep the mind free. A person shouldn’t be preoccupied with the body, because too much attention on the body and its appetites will take his or her attention away from the quest for truth. This bit of dialogue sets us up well for the way Foucault talks about sex in Greek society.

In Greek society, sexuality existed as *aphrodisia*. This Greek word is obviously where we get our term *aphrodisiac*, but it had a much broader meaning for the Greeks. Foucault notes that neither the Greeks nor the Romans had an idea of “sexuality” or “the flesh” as distinct objects. When we think of sex, sexuality, or the flesh, we usually have in mind a single set of behaviors or desires. The Greeks, while they had words for different kinds of sexual acts and relations, didn’t have a single word or concept under which they could all fit. The closest to that kind of umbrella term is *aphrodisia*, which might be translated as “sensual pleasures” or “pleasures of love,” and more accurately the works and acts of Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

These works of Aphrodite, perhaps like the works of any god or goddess, cannot be fully categorized. To do so would limit the god. This lack of a catalog or objective specification of sexuality is exactly Foucault’s point. In modern, Western society, particularly as expressed through Christianity, there is a definite way to index those things that are sexual, or the “works of the flesh.” This identifiability is extremely important for the Western mind because sex is a moral issue; it, above all other things, defines immoral practices. So, what counts and doesn’t count as sexual is imperative for us, but wasn’t for the Greeks.

The Greeks also employed the idea of *chresis aphrodision* to sexuality: The phrase means “the use of pleasures.” The Greeks’ use of pleasure was guided by three strategies: need, timeliness, and status. The strategy of need once again highlights

Socrates' approach to sexual practices. As we've seen, in ancient Greece, the relationship to one's body was characterized by moderation, but every person's appetites and abilities to cope are different. Thus, the Greek strategy was for the individual to first know his need—to understand what the body wants, what its limits are, and how strong the mind is.

The second strategy is timeliness and simply refers to the idea that there are better and worse times to have sexual pleasures. There was a particularly good time in one's life, neither too young nor too old; a good time of the year; and good times during the day, usually connected with dietary habits. The issue of time "was one of the most important objectives, and one of the most delicate, in the art of making use of the pleasures" (Foucault, 1984/1990a, p. 57). The last strategy in the use of pleasures was status: The art of pleasure was adapted to the status of the person. The general rule was that the more an individual was in the public eye, the more he should "freely and deliberately" adapt rigorous standards regarding his use of pleasures.

Rather than seeing sexuality as moral, the Greeks saw it in terms of ascetics. *Ascetics* refers to one's attitude or relationship toward one's self, and for the Greek this was characterized through strength. The word *ascetics* comes from the Greek *asketikos*, which literally means "exercise." The idea here is not simply something we do, as in exercising control; it also carries with it a picture of active training. Here we see the Greek link between masculinity and virility. The virile man in Greek society was someone who moderated his own appetites. He was the man who voluntarily wrestled with his body in order to discipline his mind. The picture we see is that of an athlete in training. For example, the athlete knows that eating chocolate or ice cream can be very pleasurable. But while in training, the athlete willingly forgoes those pleasures for what he or she sees as a higher good. The result of this training is *enkrateia*, the mastery of one's self. It's a position of internal strength rather than weakness.

Training is always associated with a goal; there is an end to be achieved or a contest to be won. In this case, the aim of the Greek attitude toward sexuality is a state of being, something that becomes true of the individual in his daily life. This is the teleology, or ultimate goal, of sexuality, the fourth structuring factor that defines a person's relationship to sex. The goal for the Greek was freedom. We can again see this idea in the conversation with Socrates. Truth and reality were things to be sought after. Too much emphasis on sex, just like eating and drinking, can get in the way of this search. As Socrates (Plato, 1993) said, "surely the soul can reason best when it is free of all distractions such as hearing or sight or pain or pleasure of any kind" (p. 118).

### *Western Modern Sexuality*

The Western modern view of sex is quite different from the Greek. It is, in fact, quite different from that which developed in the East. Where Eastern philosophy and religion developed a set of practices intended to guide sexual behavior to its highest and most spiritual expression and enjoyment (for instance, the Kama

Sutra), the West developed systems of external control and prohibitions. Of course, a great deal of the impetus toward this view of sex was provided by the Christian Church.

Part of this movement came from Protestantism with its emphasis on individual righteousness and redemption. Rather than being worthy of God because of Church membership and sacraments, Protestantism singled the individual out and made his or her moral conduct an expression of salvation and faith. But an important part was also played by the Counter-Reformation, a reform movement in the Catholic Church.

Confession and penance are sacraments in the Catholic Church. They are one of the ways through which salvation is imparted to Christians. The Counter-Reformation increased the frequency of confession and guided it to specific kinds of self-examination, designed to root out the sins of the flesh down to the minutest detail:

[S]ex . . . [in all] its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramification: a shadow in a daydream, an image too slowly dispelled, a badly exorcised complicity between the body's mechanics and the mind's complacency: everything had to be told. (Foucault, 1976/1990b, p. 19)

This was the beginning of the Western idea that sex is a deeply embedded power, one that is intrinsic to the "flesh" (*the* vehicle of sin par excellence, as compared to the Greek idea of bodily appetites), and one that must be eradicated through inward searching using an external moral code and through outward confession.

While these Christian doctrines would have influenced the general culture, they would have remained connected to the fate of Christianity alone had it not been for other secular changes and institutions beginning in the eighteenth century, most particularly in politics, economics, and medicine. With the rise of the nation-state and science, population became an economic and political issue. Previous societies had always been aware of the people gathered together in society's name, but conceiving of the people as the population is a significant change. *The idea of population transforms the people into an object that can be analyzed and controlled.*

In this transformation, science provided the tools and the nation-state the motivation and control mechanisms (ability to tax, standing armies, and so on). The population could be numbered and analyzed statistically, and those statistics became important for governance and economic pursuit. The population represented the labor force, one that needed to be trained and, more fundamentally, born. At the center of these economic and political issues was sexuality:

It was necessary to analyze the birthrate, the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate births, the precocity and frequency of sexual relations, the ways of making them fertile or sterile, the effects of unmarried life or of the prohibitions, the impact of contraceptive practices [and so on]. (Foucault, 1976/1990b, pp. 25–26)

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, medicine and psychiatry took up the sex banner as well. Psychiatry, especially through the work of Freud, set out to discover the makeup of the human mind and emotion, and it began to catalog mental illnesses, especially those connected with sex. It conceptualized masturbation as a perversion at the core of many psychological and physical problems, homosexuality as a mental illness, and the maturation of a child in terms of successive sexual issues that the child must resolve on the way to healthy adulthood. In short, psychiatry “annexed the whole of the sexual perversions as its own province” (Foucault, 1976/1990b, p. 30). Law and criminal justice also bolstered the cause, as society sought to regulate individual and bedroom behaviors. Social controls popped up everywhere that

screened the sexuality of couples, parents and children, dangerous and endangered adolescents—undertaking to protect, separate, and forewarn, signaling perils everywhere, awakening people’s attention, calling for diagnoses, piling up reports, organizing therapies. These sites radiated discourses aimed at sex. (pp. 30–31)

All of these factors worked to change the discourse of Western sexuality in the twentieth century. Sex went from the Greek model of a natural bodily appetite that could be satisfied in any number of ways, to the modern model of sex as the insidious power within. At the heart of this change is the confession, propagated by Catholicism and Protestantism and picked up by psychiatry, medicine, educators, and other experts. Confessional rhetoric is found everywhere in a society that uses Victorian prudishness as its backdrop for incessant talk about sex in magazines, journals, books, movies, and reality television shows. Repression is used as a source of discourse, and sex has become the topic of conversation—a central feature in Western discourse, and the defining feature of the human animal. Sex is suspected of “harboring a fundamental secret” concerning the truth of mankind (Foucault, 1976/1990b, p. 69).

In the modern discourse of sex, sexuality has become above all an object, a truth to discover and a thing to control. In this, sex has followed the use and development of science in general and the human sciences in particular: “The project of a science of the subject has gravitated, in ever narrowing circles, around the question of sex” (Foucault, 1976/1990b, p. 70). This form of objective control (“bio-control”) over the intimacy of humanity came through science and is linked with the development of the nation-state and capitalism. While capitalism and the nation-state seem to be firmly established and the need for such control not as great, what we are left with is a way of constructing our self as the moral subject of our sexual behavior. We have inherited a certain kind of subjectivity from this discourse, a particular way of relating to our self and sexuality. This legacy of the modern discourse of sexuality sees sex as a central truth of the self, as an object that must be studied and understood. Further, the modern discourse of sexuality tells us that this part of us is intrinsically dangerous. It is at best an amoral creature and at worst a defiled beast that treads upon sacred and moral ground.

## Summary

- Foucault takes the position that knowledge and power are wrapped up with one another; each produces and reinforces the other. Power as exercised and expressed through discourse creates the way in which we feel, act, think, and relate to our self. Likewise, the knowledge of any epoch defines what is mentally, emotionally, and physically possible. Foucault sees the practices involved in power and knowledge as games of truth—the use of specific rules and resources through which something is seen as truth in any given age. The games of truth that Foucault is particularly interested in are the ones that involve the practices through which we participate in the domination of our subjectivity.
- Much of Foucault's work is in the form of counter-history. The generally accepted model of history is that of history as memory: History is our collective memory of events. We also usually think of history as slowly progressing in a linear fashion. Foucault argues that history is far from a memory of linear events—history is power in use. It's a myth that is constructed according to specific values. Foucault proposes a counter-history, one that focuses on abrupt episodes of change and the way in which knowledge changes in response to various power regimes. Foucault uses an archaeological approach to uncover the practices that are associated with discourse and ways of thinking, and he uses a genealogical approach to uncover how discourse and power are inscribed on the body and mind.
- Foucault argues that the knowledge people hold is based upon historical epistemes. Episteme means the underlying order; Foucault uses it to refer to the way thought organizes itself in any historical period of time. Discourses are produced within historical epistemes. A discourse is a way of talking about something that is guided by specific rules and practices, that sets the conditions for our subjective awareness, and that subjugates through a will to truth and power.
- While power is found in all human practice, Foucault is particularly interested in the unique power of modernity. This expression of power is associated with changes in government, medicine, the institution of the human sciences, changes in the Western discourse of sexuality, and changes in the penal system. The change from rule by monarchy to rule by the nation-state demanded a new form of governmentality, one in which the individual watches over his or her own behaviors, one that increases control while preserving the illusion of freedom. This governmentality was aided by the human sciences through the ideas of population, an essentializing and mechanistic model of the person, and the value of expert knowledge. Governmentality was also produced through a new "medical gaze," which located symptoms and disease within the body, panoptical practices in controlling criminality, and changes in sexuality promoted by the Catholic confessional and Protestant individualism. Together, these created a discourse of governmentality that objectifies and controls through its own practices.

**TAKING THE PERSPECTIVE: POSTSTRUCTURALISM**

Many social theories take a critical perspective. Yet there is a fundamental difference between most critiques and the one offered by Foucault. With the others, there is a sense of some substance or presence, but with Foucault one gets a sense of absence. For example, with Foucault there isn't truth, only truth games; and there isn't history, just counter-histories. One way to understand this absence is to simply say that Foucault has other concerns, and that undoubtedly is part of it. But there's something deeper, more basic in back of Foucault's approach: Foucault approaches the social world as a poststructuralist.

In order to understand poststructuralism, we must first look to structuralism (since the "post" denotes that it comes after structuralism). Structuralism argues that there are deep structures that underlie and generate observable phenomena or events. This is a more radical statement than is usually made when we talk about structure in sociology (such as Parsons's structural-functionalism). For many sociologists, social structures are seen as influencing our lives; they help account for the patterned nature of human action and interaction. But social structures are usually seen as one of several influences. While we can talk about the poles of the debate in terms of structure versus agency, most sociologists acknowledge that interactions, culture, and structure all influence our behavior.

On the other hand, structuralism sees the power of structure as absolute. These structures work below the level of consciousness, and they don't simply influence or even determine our behaviors; they generate, create, and produce them. Everything that we see, think, feel, and do are in reality events or manifestations of the structure. While this may sound depressing to some of us, for structuralists this idea represented a ray of hope. As the linguistic structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) put it, "Structural linguistics will certainly play the same renovating role with respect to the social sciences that nuclear physics, for example, has played for the physical sciences" (p. 33). It is the criticism of this belief and hope that forms the core of poststructuralism.

The basic premise of poststructuralism is that language signifies rather than represents. In other words, language doesn't refer to or represent any actual reality—all we have is language. Yet people have always sought a center for language—we have wanted language to be a response to the real world, to be tied down, moored, centered in reality. This center is what brings presence to language. The use of "presence" here functions as a technical term; it implies being or existence. In other words, humans have always sought a center to their linguistic schemes that would make language authentic, true, or real. Ideas such as essence, existence, substance, subject, transcendence, consciousness, God, man, and so forth have given language a reason for its existence, a firm foundation upon which to stand, and an "invariable presence" (Derrida, 1967/1978, pp. 279–280).

But there are two problems with this idea or desire. First, a center that moors language to some reality is by definition outside of the totality of language. The idea of a monotheistic God is a good example. God is seen to exist outside of time, space, and language, and because of that external existence, believers think that He gives reason for the universe in its totality (including time, space, and language). The clearest expression of this sort of centering is the "doctrine of plenary inspiration," the belief that every single word written in the Bible was directly inspired or dictated by God.