INDEX AND INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT AND POWER BY MICHEL FOUCAULT

Introduction

In this series I will discuss *The Subject And Power* by Michel Foucault, Critical Inquiry, Vol. 8, No. 4. (1982), pp. 777-795. The motivation is my general sense that T*he Dawn Of Everything* has a pollyannaish take on decision-making in the societies they describe. They think our ancestors were made decisions communally, as if by a town meeting in Old New England. I think that's wrong in a fundamental way.

I think it's true, as David Graeber and David Wengrow say in a section heading, that as soon as we were humans we started doing human things. P. 83. One of the things humans do is try to influence the actions of others. Foucault calls that an exercise of power. In this sense, power is central to all human social activity.

Graeber and Wengrow are trying to understand how we got stuck in this current nearly universal set of social relationships. I won't try to define that set, but one of the central characteristics is that the preferences of a very small number of people are enforced on the rest of us. Normal people know that we have critical problems, and that we generally know how to solve them. That tiny number of people don't want us to carry out the solutions because it will reduce their wealth, and their control over their wealth. Their wealth translates into power in our stuck social structure, and problems aren't being solved.

I don't think we can find the answer in *The Dawn Of Everything*. That's not to devalue the book. I think it performs a valuable service by painting a different picture of the development of human societies, and thus enables us to imagine a different future. Surely that's reason enough to study the book.

Foucault gives us tools to examine the power relations that underlie our social development right up to today. Maybe that will help us figure out how to implement a better future.

Foucault's Methodology

At the beginning of the essay, Foucault explains his project.

> My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.

He's not talking about a history in the high school sense of a sequence of events and ideas, dated, arranged, and conveying an implicit sense of linear progress. He isn't talking about the history of the Civil War as a series of battles, or speeches of leaders.

Foucault's history project begins with his idea of the archaeology of ideas, and moves to a genealogy of ideas. My source for this is an essay by Gary Guttig and Johanna Oksala, "Michel Foucault", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

Conceptual frameworks aren't facts, like the dates of the Civil War. The notion of ourselves as subjects is a construct, a framework, a formulation of a perspective and much more. The words we use when we think are themselves imprecise. Consider connotation. As an example, defenders might use a word like scofflaw to describe Donald Trump's misappropriation of government documents. I might use the word thief, possibly with adjectives. The connotation

of the former is trivial offense. The connotation of the latter is condemning. Word choices frame our discourse on every subject, and to a large extent govern the range of our thinking.

Here's another example. When I was a kid, we looked at the night sky and saw a lot of stars. That gives one idea of the size of the universe. Suddenly ti turned out that practically all those stars are galaxies, and that there are billions more not visible to the naked eye. That gives me a completely different understanding of the scale of the universe.

Here's how Guttig and Oksala put it:

> The key idea of the archaeological method is that systems of thought and knowledge (epistemes or discursive formations, in Foucault's terminology) are governed by rules, beyond those of grammar and logic, that operate beneath the consciousness of individual subjects and define a system of conceptual possibilities that determines the boundaries of thought in a given domain and period.

I think this is close to Pierre Bourdieu's concept, habitus, which I discuss in detail here. This describes the cultural knowledge and expectations that guide our everyday interactions, it is the set of preconceptions we use to get along in the world. It is a form of knowledge of the world. We rarely question this knowledge because it almost always works. We use it because it makes our world predictable. In the usual course we'd be hard-pressed to state any part of it clearly.

Foucault thinks that because so much of our thinking lies below our conscious control, we can study these frameworks without considering any particular person. Our conceptual frameworks are universals, generally shared across our society. Foucault doesn't take the perspective

of any particular person. Instead, he looks at many different sources of information, not least of which is relevant social structures. As an example, Foucault wrote a book titled *History of Madness*. He discusses theories of madness and the languange people used to talk about it. He also examines the ways people dealt with people considered crazy, the institutions people set up to deal with them, and the treatments. This history reveals the changes in society's perception of madness versus sanity over several centuries.

But histories don't explain why conceptual frameworks change. For that Foucault turned to genealogies. These are efforts to explain how change happens in the discursive formations societies use to deal with madness, sexuality, and more. His work demonstrates that there is no orderly progress toward some progressive goal, just typical human evolution, some good, some bad, some impossible to evaluate.

Discussion

1. This essay is more difficult than I thought on first reading. I hope this background provides some context for the ideas we'll be examining. Specifically, we'll be looking at relations of power. Foucault writes about changes over the past two or three centuries, but I assume that power relations played the same roles throughout human history. I might be wrong, but it seems plausible.

2. Graeber and Wengrow show that human societies did not evolve out of an organized plan to proceed to a brilliant future. They think social evolution is the result of the actions of a lot people trying to cope, dominate, control, adapt, invent, share, take, and all the other things people do. This leads them to believe that we can change things to suit our desires and make life better for all of us. But how can you think that without considering the role of power relations?