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Genealogy, method (MS number: 443)

Úna Crowley,
Department of Geography and NIRSA,
16TF Hume Building,
National University of Ireland,
Maynooth,
Co Kildare,
Ireland.
Una.m.crowley@nuim.ie

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Glossary

Discourse: a social boundary defining what can be said and what cannot be said

Episteme: systems of thought and knowledge (or conceptual frameworks) which define a system of conceptual possibilities that determine the boundaries in a given period.

Subjugated knowledge: knowledge that has been discounted, disqualified or low ranking.

Synopsis

Genealogy is a historical perspective and investigative method, which offers an intrinsic critique of the present. It provides people with the critical skills for analysing and uncovering the relationship between knowledge, power and the human subject in modern society and the conceptual tools to understand how their being has been shaped by historical forces. Genealogy works on the limits of what people think is possible, not only exposing those limits and confines but also revealing the spaces of freedom people can yet experience and the changes that can still be made (Foucault 1988). Genealogy as method derives from German philosophy, particularly the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), but is most closely associated with French academic Michel Foucault (1926-24).

Michel Foucault's genealogical analyses challenge traditional practices of history, philosophical assumptions and established conceptions of knowledge, truth and power. Genealogy displaces the primacy of the subject found in conventional history and targets discourse, reason, rationality and certainty. Foucault's analyses are against the idea of universal necessities, the search for underlying laws and universal explanatory systems, the inevitability of lines of development in human progress and

the logic that we learn more about things and become better at dealing with them as time goes on. Instead, genealogy seeks to illuminate the contingency of what we take for granted, to denaturalise what seems immutable, to destabilise seemingly natural categories as constructs and confines articulated by words and discourse and to open up new possibilities for the future. Through an examination of the histories and geographies of institutions - from asylums to clinics, schools, hospitals and prisons - Foucault's genealogies encourage a re-assessment and re-evaluation of the discourses and knowledges of the 'human sciences' (Foucault examined historic discourses on madness, disease and normality, crime and punishment, sexuality, and much else as well), to question official accounts, their effects, and how they work to limit and subject individuals in modern society.

Genealogy, method

Situating Genealogy

In order to situate and better understand genealogy as method this article briefly considers some of Michel Foucault's early works. When engaging in such a periodization or categorisation, however, it is important to stress that Foucault himself regarded his work as intensely unified, part of a single enterprise, though marked by transitions.

The first period of Foucault's published works deal with a series of historical case studies that are mainly concerned with the emergence of a range of modern human sciences. In *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) (the history of the asylum and the emergence of the modern concept of mental illness), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) (a critique of modern clinical medicine) and *The Order of Things* (1966) (an examination of the evolution of thought, reason and unreason), Foucault introduced a method of analysis he referred to as archaeology. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) provides a methodological summation of archaeology as method and a challenge to the ways in which knowledges are traditionally analysed in the human sciences.

Archaeology is a process for working through the archives of a society (parliamentary debates, prison records, chronicles, diaries, journals, logbooks, official records, grand theories, popular knowledge, subjugated knowledge and so on) and, like genealogy, is concerned with 'the history of systems of thought'; the history of societal structures (or epistemes in Foucault's terminology) that have produced and shaped the boundaries of knowledge, ideas, truths, representations and discursive formations in different historical periods. Archaeology as method isolates and deconstructs components of accepted knowledge. It exposes the randomness of interpretation, the ordered procedures that made discourses possible and what conditions their unity by providing alternative accounts and uncovering popular knowledges, local beliefs and understandings that traditional history has disqualified. Foucault was not so much concerned with determining whether the knowledge systems of the human sciences were true but rather with contextualizing and historicizing notions of truth, knowledge and rationality. He examined their conditions of emergence, how and why a society in a given era considers some things knowledge, how and why some procedures are judged rational and others not. Foucault was interested in tracing out a historical ontology of the individual in relation to concepts of truth, for it is through such concepts that people constitute themselves as subjects of knowledge.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1978) and *The History of Sexuality* (1979) (historical critiques of the discourses of criminology and sexuality) Foucault rethinks and refines his analytical method, shifting from an attempt to develop a theory of rule-governed systems of discourse to a more explicit focus on power, knowledge and the body. Foucault deploys Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogical analysis of the development of morals through power as a starting point for developing a method that includes an examination of complex power relations between institutional practices, bodies and systems of thought. This more refined analytical method is not a replacement method for archaeology - the analysis of discourse, the demonstration of discontinuity and shifts and the rejection of a totalising view of history remains central to the genealogical analytic - rather archaeology and genealogy are two halves of a complimentary approach, alternating and supporting each other.

Genealogical analytics

Discipline and Punish and the History of Sexuality Volume 1 demonstrate Foucault's most thorough application of his genealogical analytics. In these works Foucault redefines the problematic of power and marks a fundamental break with conventional theorisations. Foucault was particularly interested in the way in which power operates through the construction of particular 'knowledges' and argued that it is through discourse that power/knowledge is realised. Conceptions of truth and knowledge are fundamentally products of power. This combination of power/knowledge and the embedding of reason diffuses through the social body producing what people are and what they can do, structuring the ways things are thought about, how people see themselves and others, and how they relate to the world around them. There is, however, no general theory of the character of power in Foucault's genealogies or indeed any attempt to provide one. He instead provides a tool-kit for the analysis of power relations, writing 'for users, not readers'.

In traditional conceptions of power, power is ascribed to and exercised by agents. Power is equated with domination, cause and effect, oppressed and oppressor. For Foucault, however, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, rather it is the multiple of relations that take shape and come into force throughout society. Power is not an institution, a structure, a strength people are endowed with, something that can be held or transmitted. Power is not simply imposed in a repressive way from the top of a visibly demarcated social hierarchy, through the state or major dominations (for example religious authorities, dictators and so on) in society.

Power works from diverse places and at different levels, working in and through space, among individuals, families, social groups, in institutions, simultaneously constraining and enabling. Power is incessant, constant, and wholly relational. That power is permanent and self-producing is simply the overall effect that emerges from the multiplicity of force relations. For Foucault the sovereignty of the state, of legislation, of rule in society is not a 'given', something that has been there from the outset; rather they are simply the 'terminal form power takes'.

Within a genealogical perspective power is viewed as much more diverse, subtle and complex than the negative and transparent relations of oppression, prohibition and censorship (it is important to note however that Foucault does not reject the occurrence of repression but does reject its theoretical primacy). Power is productive; it produces subjects, it makes things happen and achieves outcomes. Power operates discretely and subtly as well as ambiguously and through ostensibly freely adopted practices, determining individuals' behaviour not simply by coercion or repression but rather by controlling individuals' decisions to behave. Power does not have a single identifiable point; the power is the network itself.

Discipline and Punish

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault maps the historical transformation in the exercise of power (and by inference the use of space) through an examination of the underlying principles, aims and organisation of the prison. It charts the changes in theory, practice and social function of disciplinary institutions and practices that emerged in Western society in the 18th and 19th centuries. In particular, it provides an insight into how space is used politically in relation to deviant and non-conforming others and focuses on a microphysics of power where bodies are targeted as the site in which the most mundane social practices and local power relations feed into the constitution of large scale social and institutional power relations. Much of this book, however, is not about the punishment of criminals rather it is concerned with new modalities of regulation, with surveillance, control and policing of modern western society.

Foucault opens his genealogy of the penal system with a description of the public torturing, dismemberment and execution of a regicide, Damiens, in Paris in 1757. The detailed, shocking and gruesome contemporary account of his torture and execution is immediately followed by a description of a meticulous, tedious and regimented routine, where young offenders are subjected to constant and pervasive supervision and observation in a reformatory in Paris 80 years later. These very different methods of punishment frame the parameters of Foucault's method, namely to explore the

implications of the change from the feudal regime of power based on collective fear and built on violence and spectacle to one that is more subtle and gentler, regulating and disciplining individuals through procedures of observation, judgement, standardisation, calculated punishment or correction of perceived behavioural abnormalities. This transformation from feudal forms of power to disciplinary power in the 18th century is epitomised in the Panopticon (as designed by Jeremy Bentham), a twelve-sided polygon prison building with a central tower through which the supervisor (unobserved) can observe and monitor the behaviour of inmates. The Panopticon was designed to effect the moral transformation of its inmates by carefully controlling time, space and bodies. Although the Panopticon was never built, Foucault argues that its conceptual construction and operation reveal a lot about the use of space and nature of social control in modern Western society.

Foucault was particularly interested in the transformation in the scale and continuity of the exercise of power, the involvement of much greater knowledge of detail and the uninterrupted constraints imposed in practices and processes of discipline and training. While acknowledging the element of genuine progressive reform during this period of transition, Foucault mocked as superficial supposedly enlightened views that purported to show the emergence in the West of a humane and liberating reason. Instead of uninterrupted progress towards an increasingly caring society Foucault identifies differing styles and practices of social control in response to changing socio-economic circumstances. He argued that the complicity of power/knowledge created a plethora of experts (doctors, social workers, probation officers and so on) and institutions of discipline – prisons, schools, factories, hospitals, asylums and so on, which though often promoted in the name of improvement, in reality consolidated and legitimated administrative authority and bureaucratic regulation. This new model of discipline became a model of control for an entire society and applicable to all forms of social governance.

A crucial element of Foucault's account of disciplinary power is that it functions positively (and also oppressively) to shape individuals as particular subjects. Power through torture, blood sanctions and executions destroy their target while power through discipline and training targets the soul and the submission of bodies through the control of ideas reconstruct its subjects to produce new actions, habits and skills

and ultimately new kinds of people, reformed, normalized, rehabilitated and prepared to return to society. Discipline and surveillance is interiorised to the point that each individual is his or her own overseer. For Foucault it is the formation of subjectivity that constitutes the whole rationale of disciplinary and punishment techniques.

The History of Sexuality

Foucault's other major genealogy, *The History of Sexuality,* commences an inquiry into the conditions of emergence and success of sexuality as an organised discourse or apparatus for constructing and controlling human subjects - a strategy for directing social relations, classifying and examining bodies, authorizing and legitimizing specialized knowledges and experts (for example medicine, psychotherapists, psychiatrists and so on) and multiplying sexual perversions (the masturbating child, homosexuality, nymphomania). *The History of Sexuality* keeps continuity with the microphysics of power, the concerns of governments and societies and a focus on the relationship between power and knowledge. This work, however, places less emphasis on direct surveillance and the creation of docile bodies through discipline and provides a greater insight into how individuals' internalise norms laid down by the social sciences and truth discourses. The emphasis is on how people participate in their own subjectification and come to recognise themselves as particular types of subjects, judging and monitoring themselves and others in an attempt to conform to the norms of society. It is this focus on the body as a site of self-scrutinization, self-regulation and self-subjectification; as a site were both power and struggles are enacted that opens up a role for resistance that was not made explicit in his genealogy of the prison.

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault attacks the 'repressive hypothesis'; the common thesis that sexuality was repressed in western society (particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries) and argues that on the contrary there was a fixation with sex. He charts how governmental practices came to explicitly focus on sexual morality as a key target of social intervention, organization and normalization. During this period there was, in Foucault's words, a 'political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex' – an explosion of discussion about sex (including both social and criminal

acts). There was a flood of reports, policy documents, medical guidebooks, religious treatises and legislation concerning sexual and moral matters, the emergence of social purity organisations, a strengthening of the network of institutions dealing with sexual 'deviants' (penitentiaries, reformatory schools, asylums, prisons and so on). Illegitimate sexualities would only be tolerated in specified locales – the brothel, the mental asylum.

The claims to truth inherent in these discourses (for example, the Catholic Church claimed an infallibility in regard to its moral teaching that was binding under pain of sin) offered knowledge to people about how to behave, how to be moral, how to care for themselves and for others. Subjects were increasingly educated to make themselves the subject of their own gaze, constantly monitoring theirs and others bodies, behaviours, actions and feelings and thus perpetuating and reproducing the authority of the regime's discourses. What materialized, for the first time in modern history, was an intimate symbiosis between government and civil society. It involved a move from government by the state to self-government, self-regulation and self-discipline.

The basic thesis of Foucault's genealogy on sexuality is that sexuality is not a natural reality but a creation of a system of discourses and practices that form part of the increasing surveillance, regulation and control of individuals in modern society.

If, however, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* are interpreted in too simplistic, rigid or extreme a fashion one risks connecting and conflating power with domination in the very manner Foucault was questioning. His historical exploration of the prison and sexuality is merely an interpretive perspective, offering insights into our social worlds. The basic disciplinary logic (practices of normalization and internalization of discipline) materializes differently and unevenly in different circumstances and is always only imperfectly realised in practice. Foucault's conception of a disciplinary society should not be mistaken for a disciplined society where discipline is seen as an insidious, monolithic force enveloping all relations, where power has a repressive and relentless hold on its subjects, where resistance seems futile and citizens conform to the demands placed upon them. Foucault was interested in the techniques of power more than in the nature of power and rather than

viewing power as something to be overthrown, he provides the conceptual tools to utilize, exploit and transform power. Genealogy as method is a mind tool – a tool to stimulate thinking and cognitive curiosity.

Genealogy in Practice

Over the last two decades geographers and spatial theorists have been influenced by Foucault and have used his works as reference points for further theoretical arguments. His writings has been particularly significant for those critical human geographers seeking to define power, mainly the way it is played out in and through space and the importance of disciplinary techniques (both discursive and non-discursive) of the body in the production and deployment of power has been comprehensively elaborated. Unlike much of Foucault's work, which is almost completely deficient in empirical material to support his theorisations, these writers use detailed case studies, policy documents, censuses and so on to support their hypotheses.

More recently, human geographers and others have begun to explore ways in which personal details are stored, checked, transmitted and used as a means of influencing and managing individuals and populations. Many of our everyday activities are, as in the Panopticon, regulated as much by the *threat* of observation as by *actual* observation, for example, surveillance cameras, police check points, threat of a tax audit, not carrying a licence (failure to be readily identifiable), being caught without car insurance and so on.

Geographers and social theorists have also drawn on Foucault's genealogical method of inquiry in order to elucidate ways in which discourse, power and knowledge have come together in different spaces (including, for example, schools, industrial settings, offices, neighbourhoods, community centres, hospitals) to mould human subjectivity and morality. His work has also appealed to academics interested in the historical geographies of marginalized groups (such as Irish Travellers, native Americans), how these groups have been historically constructed through authoritative discourses and scientific practices.

The History of Sexuality fundamentally challenged traditional frameworks for understanding sexuality and has opened up the field to critical analysis, assessment, problematization and development and has been enormously significant in shaping recent thought about the relationship between sexuality and society. Feminists and queer theorists have drawn extensively on Foucault's genealogies to extend notions of sexuality, to uncover silences and to further challenge orthodoxy, to destabilize and denaturalise traditional histories, categories and theories. In particular, writers have complimented and extended the theoretical organisation and methodological perspective of genealogy in order to examine how discursive practices and processes turn notions of sexuality and sexual categories (heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual and so on) into objects of study and analysis. Over the last two decades geographers have also drawn on and modified Foucault's method to dispute heteronormative assumptions, to examine issues of sexual citizenship, explore how externally enforced regulations come to be internalised, and to expose how meanings and choices surrounding sexuality are fluid, ever changing, unstable, diverse and complex and structured through a myriad of discourses, spaces and social relations.

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