

2 Theory: Power/Knowledge

‘It is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimaera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, with which it operates at the present time’

(Foucault 1980b: 133).

After more than two decades of reception and discussion of his writings, it can be said that, throughout his work, Michel Foucault fundamentally addressed one question: how formations of knowledge have become truth and the basis for political activity. The objective of his work, he suggests, ‘is to see how men govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth’ (Foucault 1991: 79). This *history of thought* is the central theme that runs through Foucault’s entire work: In the beginning, he aims at a purely discourse theoretical account; later, he opens this perspective, to analyse the mutual constitution of power and knowledge.

The double notion of *problematization/rationality* is crucial for understanding this relation: Foucault claims that events, practices, power relations and knowledge formations are intrinsically linked. In a process of problematisation, they constitute a particular rationality, which enables and delimits political action. Problematisation thus describes the formation of domains of acts and thoughts that become the object of governmental practice.

The notion of problematisation appears in the last phase of his work only but is, as he then explains, the basic concept that defines the common ground of his studies, the ‘one element that was capable of describing the history of thought’ (Foucault 2005b). Foucault’s empirical studies do not aim at assessing particular political practices, but are concerned with the question of how an object of government is defined and made governable.

The analysis of problematisations therefore assesses political practices not on grounds of the understandings that prevail in political discourses, but makes the formation of these understandings a part of the analysis. The history of thought is thus not identical with the history of ideas or ideologies and does not take these historical positivities as its object of investigation, but addresses the entire field in which thinking as an activity happens.

The analysis of problematisations thus describes the field of constraints and enabling conditions in which political practice takes place (Kerchner 2006). This analysis entails ‘the historical, yet *a priori* conditions that make thought and practice possible and that, as such, are properly said to govern them both’ (Thompson 2010: 127).

Problematisation as a methodology therefore combines and rearranges Foucault’s two crucial methods, archaeology and genealogy (Lemke 1997). Archaeology is used ‘to examine the forms of problematisation themselves’ (Foucault 1986: 11-12), it describes the form in which human beings understand and describe themselves and the contexts they live in. Genealogy accounts for the formation of problematisations ‘out of the practices and their modifications’ (Foucault 1986: 11-12). It describes the historically specific structures and conditions through which a matter is put at issue and defined as a political problem.

The notions of problematisation and rationality define the analytical perspective of this book. It asks how the importance of the Stern Review is related to the emergence and significance of governmental practices that address investment for climate protection, and how these developments contribute to and reflect changes in the rationality of governing climate change.

The book is a study of governmentality therefore. Foucault introduced the governmentality concept in his Paris lectures in 1978 and 1979, to highlight the mutual constitution of governmental rationalities and practices: Governmental activities constitute the objects they address within a certain rationality of government and, vice versa, modificate governmental rationality. The governmentality concept also reflects Foucault’s understanding of power as a productive force, and is the context in which Foucault addresses the genealogy of the state.

The governmentality perspective is crucial for understanding how objects or domains are governed within a particular power-knowledge formation therefore. However, there are also two problems related to the analysis of governmentality. The first problem is the unclear status of governmentality as either ahistorical concept or a historically specific category (see section 2.2). This book therefore makes use of the insights from the governmentality concept, without using the concept itself.

The second problem related to the study of governmentality is a critical issue Foucault’s work more general: How to explain the emergence and change of coordinated forms of power. Foucault’s studies focus on ‘the coherence and systemacity’ (Collier 2009: 94) of a discourse or governmental constellation: they indicate that something has changed compared to a previous formation, but cannot explain, the transition between those systems.

Instead of building on alternative theoretical approaches to fill this gap, this book argues that it is possible to address the issues of change and coordination

through the notions of *dispositif* and problematisation. The *dispositif* as *analytical grid* describes how discursive and non-discursive elements within a certain power-knowledge formation are linked and directed towards a strategic objective, and allows decoupling the emergence of rationalities from the interests of individual actors and the power of a hegemonic force. While this seems leave little room for agency, the notion of problematisation gives emphasis to the role of thought in translating historical challenges into governmental rationality.

The theory chapter therefore proceeds as follows. The first part introduces Foucault's main analytical methods and concepts. The second part introduces the governmentality perspective, and describes how it is used for the analysis in this book through the concepts of *dispositif* and regimes of practices. The third part explains the operationalisation of this research perspective, and introduces the *single explanatory chain* as a poststructuralist methodology for the analysis of the Stern Review and the climate investment discourse.

2.1 Epistemology: Archaeology, Genealogy, Power

Archaeology and genealogy are the two fundamental methods that Foucault uses in his empirical studies. Whereas the latter replaces the former when he turns to the question of power, insights from archaeology remain important for the study of power-knowledge complexes and are entailed in the concepts governmentality and problematisation as well.

2.1.1 *Archaeology of discourse*

The first, archaeological phase of Foucault's work culminates in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (AK) (Foucault 1989b). In this largely methodological book he synthesises the discourse theoretical method he deployed in his preceding studies on madness, the birth of the clinic and the human sciences. At this time, Foucault does not aim at a general theory of the formation of discourses, but focuses on the rules of the formation of expert discourses; he is only interested in 'what experts say when they speak as experts' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: xxiv).

Describing in short the objective, central argument and main categories of the AK is crucial, on the one hand, to clarify important issues regarding Foucault's epistemology, in particular his understanding of discourse and knowledge; and on the other hand, to understand why and how he abandons a purely discursive account and turns to genealogy.

What Foucault's first studies had in common was the question how a certain way of thought is established as historical truth at a particular time. Beyond this, however, these studies differ in their conceptual and methodological approaches.

While *Madness and Civilization* studies the interplay of discourse and institutions in targeting and creating madness as an object of government, his next book on *The Birth of the Clinic* signifies an 'extreme swing towards structuralism' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 15), identifying the structures that sustain medical practice and discourse. But though he was 'unable to avoid [...] frequent recourse to structural analysis' here (Foucault 1989b: 16), his objective was to identify *historical conditions of possibility* rather than *atemporal* structures. 'Even at this point', Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 15) conclude, 'Foucault was never quite a structuralist'.

While these two books present mixed pictures methodologically as they argue both on the level of discourses and the level of institutions, his next book then comes closest to the methodology of the AK: in *The Order of Things* (OT), Foucault aims at no less than explaining the emergence and development of western thought in form of an archaeology of the human sciences. Foucault claims that this study 'does not belong to the history of ideas or of science: it is rather an inquiry whose aim is to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted; on the basis of what historical *a priori* [...] ideas could appear, sciences be established, experience be reflected in philosophies, rationalities be formed' (Foucault 1973: xxi, xxii).

Foucault describes this historical *a priori* as the episteme or historical order that governs the production of knowledge within a certain epoch, separating sciences from the non-scientific. The OT demonstrates that changes in the (underlying) episteme cause changes within different discourses, but remains at a purely descriptive level in not asking *how* or *why* changes to the episteme occur (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982).

Crucial for his decision to develop an approach to archaeology that focuses on the formation of discourses and (momentarily) neglects social institutions is a fundamental epistemic shift in modern western thought that Foucault describes as the emergence of man as subject and object of knowledge: 'Man appears in his ambitious position as an object of knowledge and a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator [...]' (Foucault 1973: 312).

The result is that the human sciences are trapped in an analytics of finitude as man appears doubled: as a fact among other facts that can be studied empirically, and as the transcendental condition of possibility of all knowledge: 'the

limits of knowledge provide a positive foundation for the possibility of knowing' (Foucault 1973: 317, Honneth and Saar 2008). Knowledge claims are thus always 'twisted' and 'warped', as 'each new attempt will have to claim an identity and difference between finitude as limitation and finitude as source of all facts' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 31).

It is against the background that Foucault decides to develop an approach to the analysis of discourses that rejects both immanence and transcendence.⁸ On the one hand, he aims at a method of analysis that does not rely on a founding human subject as the origin of discourse or writing history and thus is 'purged of all anthropologism' (Foucault 1989b: 16). The objective is to study western societies just as ethnology approaches unknown cultures, without relying on the interpretations of its members (Foucault 1973). On the other hand, he rejects an understanding of discourse as representing a (materialist) real or other: Discourse has its own materiality and constitutes its objects rather than merely representing them.

Foucault therefore develops a methodology for the description of discourse formations that brackets all meaningful categories, such as tradition, evolution, or oeuvre. Once these categories are removed, the remaining multiplicity of discursive elements could be analysed independent from its hermeneutical context. The objective is not to ask for the background or real meaning of speech acts, but for their mode of existence, 'what it means for them to have appeared when and where they did – and not others' (Foucault 1989b: 109).

The objective of the AK is to explain the 'law of rarity' of discourse (Foucault 1989b: 134). The rules that govern the rarity of statements are what Foucault calls the discursive field or the law of difference between the limited number of discursive events and all the other things that could have been said (Howarth 2000). To find an explanation that is irreducible to interpretations and formalizations, and thus neither derived from hermeneutics nor structuralism, the AK seeks to find the rules of formation within the discursive formation itself, describing the surface of a discourse or its positivity (Howarth 2000, Lemke 1997).⁹

⁸ Interpretations vary as to whether Foucault's objective with the AK was to rewrite the history of man in an account that goes 'beyond structuralism and hermeneutics' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982), or to develop a general approach to the study of historical discourses (Howarth 2000).

⁹ Identifying the *rules of formation of discourse* that distinguish the rare discursive events from all other utterances is thus clearly different from linguistic theory or language analysis that ask for the rules according to which a statement is made.

What remains fundamentally unclear in the AK, however, is the status of the rules of formation as principle of explanation. Foucault sometimes describes these rules as purely descriptive relations; in other occasions, he speaks of *prescriptions* in the sense of a causal relation, suggesting ‘that one can define the general set of rules that govern the status of these statements’ (Foucault 1989b: 115, Howarth 2000).

The strong causality implied in this formulation is at odds with the very objective of the AK, to remain on a purely descriptive level. It is this tension that points to the most fundamental problem of the AK, to clarify the relation between discourses and the non-discursive sphere: The description of rules of formation emphasises that discourses do not evolve isolated from the world that surrounds them, and that the conditions for the emergence of new discursive objects originate in non-discursive relations.

Rejecting an understanding of the discursive as representation of a non-discursive *real* or *material*, Foucault describes discursive practices as dependent on non-discursive practices, but nevertheless gives priority to the former as they organise the non-discursive relations. The clinical discourse, for instance, organises medical institutions, cognitive capacities, and the positions from which medical experts speak.

It is difficult to see, however, how discourse presides over other social relations, without relying on the cognitive capacities of subjects who give meaning to discursive practices, and thus how to distinguish *statements* from other, non-meaningful utterances (Honneth 1984). The only way to uphold the simultaneous rejection of objective laws and subjective creation of meaning is a circular argument, which understands the observable and describable regularity of discursive formations at the same time as their conditions of existence.

Foucault thus abandons his own methodological master plan for a quasi-structuralist explanation of discursive formations in form of the *law of rarity*. Suggesting that it is the position within discourse that attaches value and meaning to the discursive elements and produces the regularity of discourse, Foucault leans towards a structuralist interpretation again: the rules of formation are the law that governs the scarcity of statements (Collier 2009).

It is the double objective to go beyond hermeneutics and structuralism that explains for the complex and, finally, failing method that Foucault develops in the AK. What is missing is a ‘theory of articulatory practice’ that defines the relation between the rules of formation of discourses and external (causal) relations that effect on these rules (Howarth 2000: 65f.).

Likewise, it lacks an explanation of discursive change: Foucault's empirical projects on madness, delinquency and the birth of the clinic all emphasize the emergence of new discursive formations; archaeology, however, focuses on the inner coherence of discourse systems and lacks a dynamic perspective on the transition from one system to another (Suárez Müller 2004). While change is understood as the intersection of two structural systems, the passage between the systems appears as a sudden shift rather than a describable transition.

These problems prompt Foucault to open up his project towards the 'question of power' (Foucault 1973: 175, see Lemke 1997: 50ff.), that is, to ask for the formation of the rules of formation outside the discursive sphere. The shift towards a form of analysis beyond archaeology is also based in Foucault's growing interest in political discourse and its relation with scientific discourses, which makes the limits to an archaeological method become more obvious (Howarth 2000).

The turn to genealogy does not mean, however, that Foucault abandons archaeology as a method altogether. All to the contrary, 'the emphases on immanence, on coherence, and most centrally on discursive conditions of possibility, are retained' (Collier 2009: 94). The concepts of problematisation and governmentality, in particular, maintain important insights from archaeology for the analysis of political discourse and formations.

Three aspects are in particular important. First, the discursive production of objects instead of the formation of discourses around existing objects: the importance of language or concepts in making objects amenable to political intervention is central to the governmentality perspective (Rose, O'Malley et al. 2006); second, the constitution of subjects – or subject positions – within discourse;¹⁰ and third, a perspective on science and ideology that does not neglect scientific truth altogether, but aims at making explicit the – historically contingent – rules that qualify a discourse as science, and thus can account for the mutual affection of political and scientific discourses: scientific knowledge is neither the truth basis for political discourses nor an instrument of a particular group or class (Howarth 2000).

2.1.2 Genealogy, the question of power, and power-knowledge

What Foucault abandons after the AK, then, is not archaeology as a method, but the attempt to develop a theory of rule-governed systems of discursive practices that contain the rules of formation in themselves. Archaeology is complemented

¹⁰ Though Lemke (1997) criticises that it is in particular this aspect that remains unspecific within the AK.

by a – Nietzschean – genealogical approach that moves to the centre of Foucault's thought. It focuses on the emergence and becoming powerful of discourses, rather than on their inner constitution and coherence.

Towards genealogy

In the text *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* that marks the beginning of this methodological shift, Foucault outlines his understanding of genealogy, drawing extensively on Nietzsche (Foucault 1977). This genealogical approach is directed against a hermeneutical-interpretative understanding of history. Following Nietzsche, Foucault rejects a supra-historical or teleological perspective on history 'that always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past; a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development' (152).

Nietzsche countered what he called historical 'Egyptianism' with the notion of historical *spirit* or *sense*, which 'can evade metaphysics and become a privileged instrument of genealogy if it refuses the certainty of absolutes' (152f.). The challenge for such a genealogical perspective as a 'dissociating view' is to make the discontinuity and accidental character of history visible, instead of assuming a form of linear development.

Foucault follows Nietzsche in contrasting the concept of *Ursprung*/origin with *Herkunft*/descent and *Entstehung*/emergence.¹¹ Whereas origin seeks to capture 'the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities' (142), genealogy distrusts the metaphysical faith in an original identity of things, claiming 'that there is something altogether different behind things: [...] the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms' (142).

The genealogist therefore searches for the *descent* of things and their emergence. Instead of looking for the exclusive generic characteristics of an object, the objective is to rediscover the 'myriad events' that contribute to its emergence, to find 'the accidents, the minute deviations [...] the errors, the false appraisals and the faulty calculations' (146) that led to our current understandings.

Our current understanding and concepts are not the result of a continuous evolving of functions or purposes, but rather 'the current episode in a series of subjugations' (ibid.). Interpretation, consequently, does not – or not exclusively – take place in the historian's perspective on history, but is rather the process of

¹¹ While *Ursprung*/origin is used synonymous with *Herkunft*/descent in some of Nietzsche's texts, such as the *Genealogy of Morals*, the different use of the concepts in other writings such as *Human, All too Human* points to the different modes of understanding of the history of objects and thinking.

making history itself through defining concepts: the development of humanity ‘is a series of interpretations’ (151f.). Interpretations, however, that have become established as historical truths: ‘Truth is undoubtedly the sort of error that cannot be refuted because it was hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history’ (144).

It is obvious that Foucault continues to ascribe a central role to the formation of meaning in the constitution of societies. However, he now takes into account the role of power and struggles in the emergence of always historical forms of meaning (Ewald 1978). *Entstehung/emergence* takes place within a context of power relations and is produced through the interaction or clash of forces.

It is the role of the genealogist, therefore, to record the history of these struggles as the history of morals, ideals and metaphysics, and to replace the ‘anticipatory power of meaning’ with the ‘hazardous play of dominations’ (ibid.). This brings us back to the relation of ideology and science: Foucault's objective is not to deconstruct a certain truth as ideology and replace it with another truth, but to describe changes to the – political, economic and institutional – system of truth production. Genealogy asks how a current, dominant perspective emerged and how others have been neglected or not realised, and is meant to explain the emergence of the historical structures that are described by archaeology (Suárez Müller 2004).

Genealogy highlights, through the notions of descent and emergence, that discourse is based in the extra-discursive, but that these extra-discursive events or contexts influence discourse only to a certain extent. ‘Discourse is underdetermined by the things of which it speaks, and by the people who wield it, and even by a combination of these two. Discourse is largely determined by these two factors, but it does also have a strength of its own’ (Kelly 2009: 22). It is the rules of discourse, still, that decide the way in which language relates to things.

Starting from a contemporary problem that has been diagnosed and defined within our contemporary understandings as well, ‘genealogy seeks to provide a more plausible narrative of historical processes by viewing them from their proper perspective’ (Howarth 2000: 76/7). This is not about denying historical facts, but about (re-)interpreting and (re-)contextualising these facts, and aims at a reappraisal of – thus far unquestioned – historical facts.

Genealogy combines two analytical perspectives in consequence: besides a diachronic form of analysis that explains the transition and change of systems of meaning, it also entails a synchronic dimension of analysis, which describes the always specific rationality or strategy of a particular system of power (Suárez Müller 2004). This points to the close relationship between institutions, dis-

courses and practices, and Foucault identifies as the major challenge to his further work to define this power-knowledge complex.

The co-constitution of power and knowledge

Foucault deploys this genealogical perspective to develop, discuss and – partly – reject different concepts of power. In continuity with his archaeological approach he is less interested in judging the legitimacy of different forms of power than in explaining the emergence of complex knowledge-power edifices. Likewise, he does not aim at a theory of power, but rather at an analytics that describes the functioning of power in its positivity and in different concrete forms (Ewald 1978).

The mutual constitution of knowledge and (relations of) power is central to all these concepts. Genealogy is therefore on the one hand a turn to power, but on the other hand directly relevant to Foucault's understanding of knowledge and discourse as well, and thus crucial for his epistemology. Methodologically, archaeology and genealogy work together: 'As a technique, archaeology serves genealogy. [...] it serves to distance and defamiliarise the serious discourse of the human sciences. This, in turn, enables Foucault to raise the genealogical questions: How are these discourses used? What role do they play in society?' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: xxv).

A first step towards describing the relation of knowledge and power is his inaugural lecture in 1970 at the Collège de France on the *Order of Discourse* (OD)(). Here, Foucault describes various mechanisms – or forms of power – that control and limit the free floating of discourse. The OD thus opens the perspective towards the social, political and economic relations that affect or define the rules of formations of discourses. The purely negative role of power, however, which is reflected in the dichotomies legitimate-illegitimate, reasonable-unreasonable and true-false, makes the OD a transitional text in defining the complex relation of power and knowledge (Foucault 1978c; Lemke 1997).

In the following years, Foucault seeks to develop a more positive or productive understanding of this relation that does not confine power to constraining knowledge. More in general, he aims at a concept of power that is not expressed in terms of the law and does not have its origin in the institutions of the state.

The objective to develop a non-juridical understanding of power derives from his empirical studies in the prison, as he found that existing conceptions of

<http://www.springer.com/978-3-658-02405-5>

Climate Politics as Investment
From Reducing Emissions to Building Low-carbon
Economies

Wolf, S.

2013, XII, 266 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-02405-5