

RETHINKING FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF POWER IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT

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Foucault's critique of power appears to successfully discredit the repressive model of power. The idea that power is a force relation and not permanently localizable seems sensible enough for it is able to account for the fissure or changes in social relations, as in the case of social revolutions. In this paper, I argue that while this notion of power seems sound on the ideal level, social conditions bolster rather compellingly the repressive model. I argue that the Philippine social condition warrants this position and, thus, the impasse calls for a rethinking of the notion of power.

This paper intends to examine the implication of Foucault's inversion of Clausewitz and his conception of power. I will divide the paper into three parts: 1) the Clausewitzian view that was inverted by Foucault (to use the logical term: converted by Foucault); 2) the Foucauldian inversion of Clausewitz; and 3) the impact of such inversion on power and its relevance to the Philippine Social Condition

I.

In *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz views war as more than just a political action since it can also be used as a tool to attain the very end of political business. Elaborating on this position, we can glance at the assumptions of Clausewitz's position. He holds the view that

the *status quo* is always that of political relation. Regardless of persuasions, politics prevails and remains the stable medium in the affairs of the state. In this regard, war is only temporary and ends—ultimately—when the opponent attains his objective or defeats his adversary; there is of course that little possibility that the vanquished may rise again from such defeat, but at least relative peace reigns when war is not serving a political purpose.

Moreover, engaging in war is always purposeful. Even if its objective is riddled with personal interests—as in the case of royal sovereign soliciting his subjects to support his whim or of a ruler falling in love to a woman whose face launched a thousand ships; regardless whether such objective is noble, just, banal, or unjust, waging war remains purposeful. As such, it ceases when it reaches its end or objective.

Also, although war is a political instrument, that is, it is used as a strategy, perhaps the ultimate if not desperate strategy, it requires and employs sundry tactics to not only gain advantage over but also vanquish the opponent. Inevitably, it entails violence either by way of open confrontation, armed conflict, or discreet or inconspicuous sabotage. “War... is an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfill our will.”

To Clausewitz, the outcome of war is never absolute for the reason that those who are vanquished would take their loss as “passing evil” which they can, given the right circumstance, overcome (Clausewitz 1873, online).

In retrospect, the Clausewitzian view acknowledges the reality of war—a phenomenon that needs to be clearly understood even at the face of gruesome evil. More than that, however, Clausewitz tacitly affirms the primacy of political power over war. Despite the overwhelming violence in war—war being not an isolated case—it is merely a result of a political act. Political power then reigns supreme over anything in the social dimension.

For Clausewitz, war is politics pursued through other means. Here, he upholds the stability of a state in a peaceful condition propelled by strategies of politics. This is understandable from a view of an officer and military strategist. In a sense, politics is the lifeblood of the state.

Despite such factual approach towards the conception of war, Foucault sees Clausewitz's view in reverse. Claiming that politics is a continuation of war pursued through other means, Foucault inverts the Clausewitzian conception.

What is the significance of this Foucauldian inversion? For the former, war as a continuation is merely taken as a strategy of political action—a mere extension of one's political power that itself requires a strategy. In the Foucauldian inversion, politics itself is viewed as an arena of constant or, rather, perpetual conflict, whereby one employs strategies to wage the war that he will never win. Foucault himself views three implications of this inversion. First, it (this inversion) sees politics not as a relation of force that ceases at the attainment of the objective, but from the viewpoint of war, that relationship of force will be continually employed even if the condition seems to be of peace (Foucault 1997, 16). In this token, the political force will be employed through whatever means. Second, with the strategies being employed, "[we] are always writing the history of the same war, even when we are writing the history of peace and its institution" (ibid.). In this sense, our social history is produced or constituted by the tactics or strategies that we employ; whether it is the history of the oppressed or the oppressor, it does not matter that much—society develops because of the power relations of its members. More importantly, this inversion gives Foucault the insight to have war as model for analyzing the notion of power—war as the analyzer of power.

In *Society must be defended*, Foucault reviews Clausewitz's position not to analyze politics but to give an important tool for analyzing power, which was lacking then. Early conception looks at power as something that one wields, perhaps by way of right or whatever form of transfer that leads to one's possession of it, and exercises over other men. In the case of a royal power, for example, a king exercises authority over his subjects by way of having the power over his constituents, determining their fate or their lives. In this conception, the sovereign is something that he possesses.

Elsewhere, Foucault observes also the view of the Marxist conception of power which is ensconced in the "economic function." For him, power is subsumed under economic functionality and is

effected in the constant opposition between the forces of production—power in this instance is the constant tension between the forces of production and always ends up in class domination.

II.

Foucault definitely rejects any metaphysical conception of power. To view power from a metaphysical standpoint entails a search for foundation, an activity that is far from appealing to him. “What is power?” then is a pointless question to ask, for no coherent theory of power can be had in Foucault’s thought (Gallagher 2008, 396).

Theories of power, for Foucault, are inadequate. Two theories come to mind. First is the “contract-oppression schema,” which views power as a “primal right that is surrendered and which constitutes sovereignty, with the contract as the matrix of political power” (Foucault 1997, 16-17). This power is seen from a social contract in which failure to abide by the guidelines constitutes rescission of the contract and leads to oppression against vulnerable others who have ceded their rights. In this theory, power is volatile, when it resides on individuals who are in a position to dominate over others. The second is “war-repression schema,” which views power as existing in a perpetual conflict, manifesting itself in the interplay of “struggle and submission” (Ibid., 17). In this view, endless conflict mediates relations and an unceasing will to repress others manifests.

These two views are attempts at reifying power, and for Foucault, they do not account for a comprehensive analysis of power. They only admit staticity of power, not its dynamism. Foucault’s view on power takes shape in his denial of its reifiability: power is beyond one’s grasp; it is not “acquired, seized, or shared” (Foucault 1978, 94). No one wields it, as not one permanently holds it.

Summing up his objection to the metaphysical conception of power, Foucault claims,

Power is not a substance. Neither is it a mysterious property whose origin must be delved into. Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals.... The characteristic feature of power is that some men can no more or less entirely determine other men’s conduct—but never exhaustively or coercively (Foucault 1994b, 324).

Since the repressive conception of power is denied, how is power then to be understood? How does one discern power? First, “power is everywhere” and, if I may add, nowhere. It is nowhere in the sense that no one can permanently hold it; it is not attached to any single person, position, or structure. This can be clarified by the thought that any man who happens to be the most powerful man on earth, if there is such a person, can be the most vulnerably powerless person before his wife, lover, or child; or a demanding Chief Executive Officer who founded his own company may seem powerful before his people but may also be at the mercy of his or her creditors. In another sense also, power is everywhere. Power in this respect is contingent upon agents, systems, structures, institutions.

Foucault, at length, claims,

...power must be understood in the first instance as multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law in the various hegemonies (Foucault 1978, 92-93).

Clearly, power involves these elements: relations, processes, supports, and strategies. Power arises out of the dynamism of relations. The most-powerful and powerless-man-example can now be understood in this context; his power emanates from each nexus of relations properly “aligned” to the force relations. “Power is exercised through an agent’s actions only to the extent that other agent’s actions remained appropriately aligned with them” (Rouse 1994, 108). The man is powerful insofar as the network of relations is consistently functioning within such network, but when other elements digress from the operation of the network, the force of

such power is interrupted to the point of powerlessness. As a process, power is not identifiable in one aspect only; it is discernible through its effects. While transformations of the elements in power relations can be genealogically studied, power can be understood according to its effects. It is noteworthy how the processes involved in a medical gaze, restructuring of the clinic, formation of specific forms of relation, and employment of medical language have constituted a new form of knowledge (Foucault 1973, 196). Also, in *History of sexuality*, Foucault (1978) affirms the process of power as shown in ceaseless transformations through which discourses are formed and “knowledges” produced. He shows one result of such process is the “questioning of adult sexuality” through the relationship of the psychiatrist to a child.

In this relational and processual conception of power, Foucault holds consistently his rejection of the theory of power as repressive and dominating. What is deemed as a repressive exercise of power, of domination, is viewed as the proliferation of what is being repressed. Attempts at prohibiting discourses on sexuality, for example, translate themselves into the “architectural layout” of an institution (Foucault 1978, 27). To strictly enforce sexual prohibitions, material structures have to be arranged, that is, spaces require proper management; interactions have to be organized, that is, segregation between sexes is observed; and organizations need to be structured. Each element in the power network musters support. Eventually, this support constitutes systems that justify the operation of every member in the network, or it can be the fissure that can lead to contradictions and resistance.

In addition, power is not tied with capacity (Foucault 1994a, 337). It is not stored in an individual, waiting for the right time to be exerted; rather, since it is always placed in relations, it is an “action upon action” (Borch 2005, 158). Foucault mentions two necessary elements of power relations:

A power relationship... can only be articulated on the basis of two elements that are indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that “the other” (the one over whom power is exercised) is recognized and maintained to the very end as the subject who acts; and

that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible interventions may open up (Foucault 1994a, 340).

Power thus necessarily involves an agent or acting subject, and he or she is presupposed to exercise certain liberty. "There is no power without potential refusal or revolt," says Foucault (1994b, 324; See also Berard 1999).

Power also produces knowledge. It does not mean that knowledge is power, as often interpreted in the light of Francis Bacon. Rather, power relations render knowledge possible. In this sense, "power constitutes the internal possibility of certain knowledges" (Wong 2007, 3). Foucault writes,

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply be encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that 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 (Foucault 1977, 27).

Knowledge is power; power is knowledge. What does this reversal of power and knowledge entail? The multiplicity of relations, process, support, and structure of power engenders discourse that would congeal as knowledge. One can notice, for example, how the power to punish criminals engenders the whole corpus of observation and examinations, "regimes of truth," institutions (Ibid.); or, one can consider how regulations of sexuality produce the whole field of knowledge—while sex is regulated, it is much talked about in silence (Foucault 1978).

In sum, Foucault's conception of power involves a network of relations with corresponding practices coherent with its system and organization that acts upon the actions of subjects who have within themselves the capacity to exercise the liberty in a form of resistance or assent.

III

Looking at the aspects of our social situation, we encounter a glaring image of what we are politically. Readily we can admit several pictures of our political setup: undeniably, most political entities who we deplore owing to their unchecked hold over the reigns of government from the local to the regional and national level. Each political fabric of society has a dynastic name that control over such political space. It is an avenue where a class of politicians dominates such region even if it is not an epitome of good governance. While admittedly, the EDSA revolutions appear to embody the objective of social amelioration through good governance, the same political figures have found a way to reinscribe or reinsert themselves in the social-political milieu. Political names deemed notorious before have reemerged the scene. On the idea that they have lost the initial war, that is, they are vanquished from second phase of political, their defeat is only temporary. After all, the political arena, based on this view, is in the state of perpetual war.

There are of course attempts to perpetually eliminate such practice. Many groups advocating for good governance devoted their resources to no avail. Attempts to educate the masses by independent and idealistic parties have not carved a dent on political patronage.

The same can be said concerning distribution of resources. While laws are already crafted to stimulate and effectuate changes, many other strategies arise stalling or delaying, if not preventing, implementations of the policy. CARP, for example, has to be extended after more than twenty years, for the simple reason that landowners have found their way of rationalizing the existence of their own the land to exclude it from the program. The Hacienda Luisita, for example, took longer years—lifetime for some—for the farmers to receive their own land—considering the status of the current judiciary, the resolution with finality of distributing the land to the farmers may also be finally appealed without finality. Despite efforts of resistance from the parties concerned, from Luisita or Sumilao farmers, though not futile, theirs acts can be regarded as one of the strategies of the party.

Curiously, we can relate similar observation to the biodiversity conservation. Bryant's study examines similar efforts of NGOs to

protect the biodiversity of the Philippines, being considered then the “one of the top ten biodiversity hotspots in the world” (Bryant 2002, 275). To Bryant, the strategic activities of NGOs, despite their politics of resisting governmental policies that might affect the rights of indigenous people or might jeopardize the ecological integrity, NGOs through their contrasting strategies extend, rather ironically, the reaches of governmentality; their politics of resistance produces a practice that merely legitimizes the policies of government. To Bryant, ... NGOs appear to serve a fundamentally *pro-active* role in the assertion of political mechanisms of control and surveillance, sometimes in spite of deeply held individual and organizational beliefs to the contrary in the NGO sector. (Bryant 2002, 286)

If we were to view our social condition from the Marxist lens of power, we would easily make sense of it because the class struggle would be apparent even if the opposing classes may have transformed their appearances, and we can attribute the status quo to the ideological positions. But the Foucauldian conception of power is unique. It recognizes oppositions as merely elements of power relations. By rejecting the model of power as repression or domination, Foucault rejects the ideology. In this regard, all parties of power relations cannot be regarded as occupying ideological position. Also, since knowledge is not wielded by the dominant one, parties of force relations co-produce knowledges. Resistance, therefore, is merely a strategy.

Looking at the social condition, we would see that the attempts at resisting any strategy can be also countered by the opposing party—but the opposition between parties can be perpetual. After all, the Clausewitzian inversion acknowledges perpetual relations of power. In this sense, the power relations would bring us to an impasse, not an impasse that places both parties on equal grounds, but that the cycle of resistances would remain. In the end, the efforts of, say, Luisita farmers, though commendable, would appear futile as they have to counter tactics from the chest of stratagem of their adversary. In this setup, Foucault depicts rightly the scenario of multiple power relations. But this is problematic in the sense that the

very idea of employing strategy is to insure that we would finally win. But even if we prevail over our adversaries on some engagements, still we have to fight the same war.

The suggestion is of course to be vigilant; vigilantism, however, would not be enough. Tacitly, we admit that we are still fighting the same war. In the long run, we would just be legitimizing the *status quo*. In other words, the conception of strategy would remain useless in the end. Thus, we are still trapped within the contraptions of power conceived by Foucault. We can then see that Foucault's acknowledgement of strategy is problematic.

Curiously also, in this type of conception, the subject believes himself to be free; he lives in the illusion of acting according to his will. This can be further supported by the thought that the individual or group may succeed in its endeavor, that is, the current regime may be subverted by an efficient form of resistance. We may believe that we can succeed in our endeavors since we encounter small successes in our resistance but what comes out in the process is being caught within web of power relations. This has happened and perhaps will continue to happen among officials who have shown promises of good governance: they end up within the contraptions of power. The same people who advocated for good governance may be persecuted for ending up bad governors. The system of power relations, though admits resistance, merely overwhelms such resistance.

Foucault's analysis of power clearly reveals that we are confined within the web of power; we are entrapped such that even if we claim to be free subjects—since subjugation entails freedom—our claim remains within the realm of such power. We are trapped. After all, power is everywhere.

This is the problem if we were to take the Foucauldian model of power. As conscious subjects that have the potential for resistance, we employ strategies or conduct activities that will help us attain our objectives, yet we realize that they only become helpful in legitimating the discursive practice. Indeed, our opposition would just entail production of knowledge. In other words, resistance only begets power, and power, resistance.

This problem leaves us with the tone of cynicism. The problem of power translates to the issue of empowerment. If empowering people merely legitimizes the power relations, would it not be just a vicious cycle to pursue such intervention in the social condition? To what extent is our empowerment powerful?

Foucault's conception of power encounters certain limits in social conditions, especially when consider resistance in power relations. This problem obviously calls for rethinking the Foucauldian model of power against the background of social condition.

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