



Power, Discourse and the *Dispositif*: A Foucauldian Ontology of the Present

Poder, discurso y el dispositivo: una ontología foucaultiana del presente

Tomás David Rocha Correia

Universidade de Beira Interior (Covilhã, Portugal) / Praxis – Center for Philosophy, Politics and Culture

tomas.correia@ubi.pt

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1096-9136>

DOI <https://doi.org/10.48204/2805-1815.11504>

INFORMACIÓN DEL ARTÍCULO	ABSTRACT/RESUMEN
Recibido el: 24/04/2026 Aceptado el: 14/08/2026 Keywords: Discourse, <i>dispositif</i>, genealogy, power, truth Palabras clave: Discurso, dispositivo, genealogía, poder, verdad	Abstract: The Foucauldian approach to epistemology represents a fundamental departure from absolute truth and classical structuralism, emphasizing instead the contingent and discursive construction of knowledge. This method rejects the notion of phenomena as subordinate to fixed, universal structures, proposing instead a genealogical analysis that uncovers how discourses, practices and power relations sustain sociocultural accepted “regimes of truth”. Inspired by Nietzschean philosophy, Foucauldian genealogy functions as an “archaeology of the present,” meticulously deconstructing dominant narratives to reveal the historical mechanisms that legitimize specific forms of knowledge while marginalizing others. Central to this methodology is the concept of the <i>dispositif</i> (apparatus), a heterogeneous network of institutional, physical, and discursive elements that form a grid of intelligibility for power relations. Within this framework, power is not merely a repressive tool but an omnipresent, creative force that constitutes the subject and regulates the limits of what can be thought or expressed. By shifting the focus from the discovery of an “objective” reality to the production of truths, the Foucauldian method encourages a break from the Cartesian unitary subject and highlights the fluidity of meaning across different contexts. Ultimately, this genealogical project serves as a practical tool for an “ontology of the present,” challenging uncritically accepted truths and opening space for the “undefined work of freedom”. By scrutinizing the historical crossroads where discourses converge and diverge, the researcher can move

beyond the reproduction of established knowledge to explore new, *avant-garde* possibilities for creating and promoting thought.

Resumen:

El enfoque foucaultiano de la epistemología representa una ruptura fundamental con las verdades absolutas y el estructuralismo clásico, enfatizando en su lugar la construcción contingente y discursiva del conocimiento. Este método rechaza la noción de los fenómenos como subordinados a estructuras fijas y universales, proponiendo en cambio un análisis genealógico que descubre cómo los discursos, las prácticas y las relaciones de poder sostienen los "régimenes de verdad" aceptados socioculturalmente. Inspirada en la filosofía nietzscheana, la genealogía foucaultiana funciona como una "arqueología del presente", deconstruyendo meticulosamente las narrativas dominantes para revelar los mecanismos históricos que legitiman formas específicas de conocimiento mientras marginan otras. Un elemento central de esta metodología es el concepto de *dispositif* (dispositivo), una red heterogénea de elementos institucionales, físicos y discursivos que forman una rejilla de inteligibilidad para las relaciones de poder. Dentro de este marco, el poder no es meramente una herramienta represiva, sino una fuerza omnipresente y creativa que constituye al sujeto y regula los límites de lo que puede ser pensado o expresado. Al desplazar el enfoque del descubrimiento de una realidad "objetiva" hacia la producción de verdades, el método foucaultiano fomenta una ruptura con el sujeto unitario cartesiano y destaca la fluidez del significado a través de diferentes contextos. En última instancia, este proyecto genealógico sirve como una herramienta práctica para una "ontología del presente", desafiando verdades aceptadas acríticamente y abriendo espacio para la "labor indefinida de la libertad". Al escudriñar las encrucijadas históricas donde los discursos convergen y divergen, el investigador puede ir más allá de la reproducción del conocimiento establecido para explorar nuevas posibilidades vanguardistas de creación y promoción del pensamiento.

Introduction

Regardless of the taxonomy applied to his analytical method, which oscillates between the post-structural and the post-modern (two concepts that will not be addressed in detail in this essay), the (de)constructivist influence on Michel Foucault's approach is unquestionable, particularly regarding the analysis of social/cultural phenomena, practices and textuality. For Foucault, no analysis is immune to the permeability of the power relations and dynamics that emanate from every phenomenon (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). Following the emergence of an increasingly volatile, chaotic, and dispersed context - which culminated in the events of May 1968 in France - a set of responses emerged from the French academy addressing what were seen as significant gaps in the structuralist (and, simultaneously, considerably reductionist) methodology. This new analytical lens, focusing on the particular, the contingent and the atomized, manifested as an alternative to methodologies such as the one popularized by Lévi-Strauss—traditionally understood as the subservience of phenomena to

a dominant and central structure that constrains the *modus operandi* of those phenomena. Thus, for structuralists, any system encompassing elements such as culture, language, sexuality, or gender is governed by a structure marked by consistent rules and constitutive institutions. It is these structures that create and regulate meaning, shaping our relationship with knowledge, learning, and truth.

By contrast, the Foucauldian method emphasizes the contingency and contextuality of the interaction between, for example, a text (object) and its reader (subject). In this interaction, the text abandons its position as a mere passive object - restricted to an archaeological excavation intended to unveil some meaning waiting to be "discovered" - to (re)occupy its active and constitutive character as a producer of knowledge (Han, 2013). Consequently, the text is capable of producing different meanings for different readers, which also constitutes a break from the Cartesian concept of a unitary subject. The text and, by extension, knowledge, vary in significance over time and under the different contexts in which interaction with them occurs (Agger, 1991). This atomization of meaning implies a metamorphosis of the concept of "truth" into one of "truths." If the meaning of each text is diffuse and fosters multiple interpretative analyses, it becomes imperative to reject a single "true" and "faithful" interpretation of the text under analysis. The reader must, therefore, reject the pretence of standing outside of textuality (in a quest for a fixed ideal of objectivity), as there is no sphere external to that textuality (Derrida, 1997).

Foucauldian Genealogies

Through a deconstruction and reconstruction of textuality, the Foucauldian method recovers the obscure mechanisms that sustain certain structures, creating greater transparency in the demand for a more incisive and profound analysis regarding the constitutive processes of that very structure. In the analysis of texts or social/cultural practices, the focus is shifted from the author/practitioner to the reader/observer. There is a clear rejection of totalizing, essentialist, and functionalist ideas in favor of an analysis that prefers the constitution of subjects who are culturally and discursively created and structured (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). Reality thus becomes multiple, tenuous, fragmented, diversified, and, above all, contingently constructed. Tamboukou (2013) links the Foucauldian method to its

Nietzschean origins, providing a clear definition of what constitutes a genealogical approach to knowledge:

Genealogy, as a Nietzschean concept redeployed in Foucault's work, is, in simple terms, the art of archival research—the patience to work meticulously with dusty documents, seeking the most insignificant details, bringing to light, in various ways, previously unthinkable contours, discourses, and practices that human beings have used to give meaning to themselves and the world around them. Rather than burdening itself with the task of reaching an ultimate and obscure end, genealogy represents an archaeological journey without a destination. In parallel with archaeology, genealogy reveals layers of distortions/constructions and is directed toward the future rather than the past. (p. 2)

Contrary to the spirit of the modern Enlightenment, for authors such as Foucault, there is a clear assertion that in the study of text or practice, there is no point of reference, no unitary truth, and no absolute reality (Agger, 1991). The Foucauldian lens provides a nuanced analysis that aims to deconstruct, through critique, the mythology and illusion associated with modern thought - particularly regarding the scientific method, which tends to seek the quantifiable, the measurable and the generalizable. This type of analysis focuses on historical context, seeking to examine the relationships between different discourses - which correspond, in Foucauldian terms, to an individualized group of statements formed with the goal of constituting a group (Foucault, 1972) - and the way systems/structures interact, dealing primarily with the conditions that constitute knowledge and truth.

The Foucauldian method does not necessarily seek to provide a detailed explanation for a given historical event, but merely to (re)construct the paradigm within which it occurred (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). Thus, the process of creating truth(s) is inherently a discursive process, subject to power relations between its components, in which the individual seeking the truth constructs their own subjectivity (Waite, 2005). This discursive process corresponds to a complex set of practices that attempt to keep statements in circulation and/or exclude certain statements from circulation, seeking to self-legitimize (Mills, 2003).

Foucault's genealogical project constitutes an ontology of the present. By questioning that which we consider self-evident and self-explanatory, it becomes possible to distance

ourselves from our contingent truths and seek new ways of creating and promoting knowledge. To write a history of the present, one must distance oneself from the mechanisms that created past knowledge: "(...) we must distance ourselves from our present and ask practical questions about life." (Tamboukou, 2013, p. 9). Only then will it be possible to scrutinize narratives and deconstruct the eventual distortions and the regimes of truth that accompany them. The specific focus on the deconstruction of narratives promotes a logic of thinking about knowledge that moves away from generalist terms and holistic views, giving primacy to the role of singular ideas, complex themes, and the derivative complications of historically contingent moments.

Foucault approaches genealogy through the construction of a *dispositive* (apparatus), defined as "(...) the grid of intelligibility where power relations, knowledge, discourses and practices interconnect and provide links between one another" (Tamboukou, 2013, p. 9). A *dispositif* is essentially a network of relations established between more or less heterogeneous practices, discursive and non-discursive elements - "(...) the visible and the invisible (...)" including "(...) discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulations, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical propositions, morality, philanthropy, etc." (Foucault, 1980a, p. 194).

Considering that *dispositifs* are typically heterogeneous and dispersed, the genealogical methodology allows the researcher to gather an immense variety of information, data and approaches regarding the construction of knowledge. After constructing a *dispositif*, the genealogist must encompass all the different components relevant to their investigation while simultaneously attempting to identify which narratives might be distorting what is considered true knowledge within a given field of study.

One of the primary roles of Foucauldian methodology is precisely to understand the way(s) in which truth is constructed, allowing for an understanding of the eventual subconscious biases a researcher might continue to uphold in their contributions to a specific field. The genealogical approach to knowledge must always interrogate what constitutes "truth," paying special attention to the relationship between knowledge and the historically situated criteria for verifying truth and learning. If it is these narratives, with their practices and power relations, that constitute the subject's position in relation to their environment, then it is the role of genealogy to deconstruct and perceive the various parts that compose

these narratives, tracing the history of how truth took the form it has today. It serves, above all, as a kind of map that assists the researcher in understanding how different narratives interact, how discourses and practices are formed, and how the subject constitutes themselves in the face of these narratives. In the words of Foucault (1980b):

Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131)

This spectrum of self-constructed analysis is, therefore, a historical product in terms of ethical, political and cultural values. Foucault combines historical analysis with psychological and, above all, philosophical analysis, particularly in the later stages of his work. The genealogical analysis of, for instance, what he terms "discipline" (a power mechanism that regulates thought and behaviour through more or less subtle means) is conducted through its historicity which, following a shift in epistemological and ontological trajectory, distinguishes Foucauldian methodology from others, breaking with a past marked by Lévi-Straussianism (Khan & MacEachen, 2021).

In a genealogical methodology, the elements that constitute the subject are fluid, dispersed and historically situated. When the question of the subject's constitution arises, we find no outlined objective to "discover" an obscure essence lying deep within the subject or that, in some way, helped to constitute it. Nor do we seek a *telos* to guide us. The issue at hand is not to unveil what knowledge and learning appear to be today; the fundamental question is to understand how knowledge and learning became what they are today. History unravels into multiple threads that have led to the state of knowledge as we know it at this particular moment. But is it possible that what we consider "truth" lies at the crossroads of various discourses that converge and diverge? To answer this question, we must adopt an introspective gaze that critically analyses our practices and our truths. Authors like Foucault do not give us the answer to this question, but they certainly provide the tools to help us construct an answer. For Foucault (1984):

(...) this critique [of uncritically accepted truths] will be genealogical in the sense that it will not be deduced from the form of what we are or what is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it seeks to give as much impetus as possible to the undefined work of freedom. (p. 46)

Power and the Construction of Truth(s)

For Foucault, power is everywhere, adopting omnipresent characteristics. A traditional conceptualization of power tends to view it as an instrument - something that can be wielded to oppress and control individuals or groups. Power, from a Foucauldian perspective, is not only relational but also often actively constitutive, insofar as it is capable of producing the path by which the subject is created and the way these subjects relate to one another within a given society (Foucault, 1978).

It is in this way that power - whether disciplinary or in the form of biopower (which corresponds to the administration and regulation of human life at the level of both the individual body and the population at large) - produces discursive practices which, in turn, produce knowledge and truth. This creation of truth originates within the subject as a subconscious constraint on how they should express themselves, act or behave, according to a pre-established rule of "common sense." Consequently, any individual (including the researcher) is evaluated based on how closely they approximate this pre-established norm. Thus, it is through power, acting within our discursive practices, that the process of normalization is realized, leading to the establishment of truths. In short, the Foucauldian concept of "power" creates a duality that, beyond being merely destructive/repressive, is also active/creative. Power circulates diffusely and discursively at the crossroads of discourse, knowledge and truth, constituting the subject in a nearly consensual and not strictly oppressive manner.

The primary methodological question for genealogy focuses on understanding where truth emerges from and whether or not there existed the possibility of an alternative path for the construction of that truth that was not taken - which would lead to a different understanding of what is considered truth. If we face the present assuming there are no other

possibilities for moments other than the one we currently experience - seeking only to recognize the path truth has travelled to reach the truth we know today - it may not be because certain contingencies became fundamentally irrelevant, but rather because those very contingencies led us to what we know today, becoming an assumed narrative. Thus, to understand who we are, we must adopt a position that rejects the premise that truth exists somewhere, merely waiting to be discovered according to an objective reality. Truth is generally associated with principles and procedures. Truth, from a Foucauldian perspective, revolves around a game of truths (*jeu de vérité*) - that is, a combination of discourses competing for supremacy - rather than an obligation to truth (i.e., the belief that truth can be objectively pursued). The obligation to truth leads to a state in which that which is considered true remains unquestioned by those who aspire to produce knowledge (Foucault, 1980b).

If these historical elements are, indeed, contingencies, then there exists the potential for a more detailed understanding of the path that led us to the present, as well as the paths that may be taken in the future. The fundamental problem of analyzing a past event without considering the specific ramifications of a historical trajectory that constituted us (and created what we know) is the danger of accepting a notion of "change" as something practically unattainable.

The most relevant component of the genealogical methodology is the confrontation with the possibility that what we consider to be the truth cannot be removed from the context and structures that led to its production. Given that genealogy is concerned with how procedures, practices, and institutions affect the way we construct and legitimize knowledge, it becomes imperative to formulate a separation between knowledge that is already accepted as true and legitimate and all other investigative alternatives. This entire process renders the production of knowledge far less circular: the researcher must produce knowledge not to confirm what is already known within pre-established frameworks, but rather to test the limits of what can (or cannot) be considered knowledge, while simultaneously seeking to deconstruct the narratives and discursive practices that stifle investigational potential.

In this way, genealogical analysis interrogates what types of practices, linked to what types of externalities, can determine the production of the discursive practices under investigation (Tamboukou, 2013). If power intervenes in every practice and, consequently, legitimizes discourses, there is likely an inherent tendency for it to continue following that

path as specific discursive practices gain relevance at the expense of others, which remain marginalized. The Foucauldian method seeks to reintroduce marginalized practices into the center of the discussion, viewing power not as a mere repressive force, but as a force capable of reconfiguring what we consider truth.

Conclusion

It is the role of the researcher –whether in textual analysis or in the analysis of cultural, social and economic phenomena, among others– to engage in an incessant search for what is not represented, rather than merely reproducing what is already established and known. During scientific investigation, genealogy allows for a greater openness toward the production of *avant-garde* knowledge, seeking to experiment with that which has not yet been experienced, while (attempting) to represent that which has not yet been represented. Truth, therefore, becomes a self-sustaining process with neither beginning nor end, whose paths and crossroads remain unmapped.

The influence of the Foucauldian method on contemporary political philosophy reinforces the importance of critical thinking and the deconstruction of naturalized truths. This approach enables not only the problematization of the epistemological foundations of knowledge but also the reassessment of the structures that legitimize certain discourses over others. By recognizing the discursive nature of truth, space is cleared for a diversity of perspectives and for continuous reflection on the regimes of power that sustain them. The Foucauldian method is not limited to a mere theoretical prism; it constitutes a practical tool for the critical analysis of society. Applied to different fields of knowledge, it allows for the questioning of institutions, social practices and normativities, highlighting how power relations influence the production and circulation of knowledge. Faced with an infinity of possibilities, the Foucauldian methodology proposes that instead of simply looking back, we must, above all, look around.

References

- Agger, B. (1991). Critical theory, poststructuralism, postmodernism: Their sociological relevance. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 17(1), 105–131.
- Derrida, J. (1997). *Of grammatology* (G. Spivak, Trans.; Corrected ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge* (A. M. Sheridan Smith, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume I—An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1980a). The confession of the flesh: A conversation. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977* (pp. 194–228). Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Foucault, M. (1980b). Truth and power: An interview. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977* (pp. 109–133). Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Foucault, M. (1984). What is Enlightenment? In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault reader* (pp. 32–50). Pantheon Books.
- Han, S. (2013). Structuralism and post-structuralism. In A. Elliott (Ed.), *The handbook of social and cultural theory* (pp. 39–55). Taylor & Francis.
- Khan, T., & MacEachen, E. (2021). Foucauldian discourse analysis: Moving beyond a social constructionist analytic. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1–9.
- Mills, S. (2003). *Routledge critical thinkers: Michel Foucault*. Routledge.
- Tamboukou, M. (2013). A Foucauldian approach to narratives. In M. Andrews, C. Squire, & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research* (2nd ed., pp. 88–107). SAGE Publications.
- Waitt, G. R. (2005). Doing discourse analysis. In I. Hay (Ed.), *Qualitative research methods in human geography* (pp. 163–191). Oxford University Press.