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**Research Paper no. 9/01**

**FOUCAULT'S OVERARCHING  
CONCEPT OF POWER AS  
GOVERNMENTALITY**

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## **Research Papers from the Department of Social Sciences, Roskilde University, Denmark.**

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## **Abstract**

Power is typically seen as a form of domination, which is operative when agents pursue their interests in conflict with others. Foucault challenges the prevailing and reductionist conception of power in terms of domination, conflicts and interests. He proposes instead an overarching approach to power as the ability to make a difference. To provide this concept with analytical purchase it has to be viewed as relative to context, which situates and identifies power relations in relation to each other. It is in this light Foucault's reference to power as a complex strategical situation should be seen, where power is immanent in the structuring of context. This refers among other things to the governing of self and others, meaning that it deals with the nature and scope of the political power of authority broadly considered.

**Keywords: Context, Dahl, Foucault, governmentality, identity, limit, politics, power, Weber**

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# FOUCAULT'S OVERARCHING CONCEPT OF POWER AS GOVERNMENTALITY

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## Introduction

The word ‘power’ is widely used to connote all sorts of actions, events, relations and structures. It is used in academic as well as in ordinary parlance, and it appears as both descriptive and prescriptive, especially when it is viewed negatively. It does not seem exaggerated to say that power evokes images in everybody, that is, opinions and reasons as to how it is used and how it can or should be understood. These images might not be clearly stated, and the ways the word is used might not be consistent. This does not, of course, stop us from talking about power, just as it does not prevent us from trying to make sense of reality by using this word. But how does it make sense?

According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, power is a generic category that describes “ability to do or effect something or anything, or to act upon a person or thing”. This implies, according to Morriss (1987: 19), that power is “a dispositional concept...: it is a *capacity*” to make a difference. Hence the relation between ability and difference is understood in terms of making or doing (Patton 1998: 67). This would, apparently, license to grasp power in terms of causation, because power refers to the essential connection between ability and doing, or capacity and performance. However, it is far from clear what is implied by this connection between ability or capacity, on the one hand, and doing or performance on the other. Is the former prior to the latter as cause to effect? Can they be separated temporarily and spatially? And what is the relation between, ability/capacity, defining the causal powers of something or somebody, and doing/performance as the actual exercise of power? In other words, what is the relation between the essential and the contingent?

Power means to be able to do something, to make a difference: we *are* able or we *have* ability. ‘Are’ or ‘have’ are seductive metaphors, not just because they appear commonsensical, but because they invert a causal relationship. Agents can produce effects because they ‘have’ power or ‘are’ powerful, but we say that someone ‘has’ power or ‘is’ powerful only by looking at what we believe to be the effects of ‘having’ power or ‘being’ powerful in the first place. Even though the ability to make a difference seemingly has little analytical purchase, I will contend that it does give a hint of a conceptual structure of power, and that it will be possible to question the assumptions going into the images of power, which has important consequences theoretically as well as politically.

When setting out to analyse power, one is faced with a host of definitions: ways of approaching power that give it form and content, which are bound up with normative considerations and interests. The idea is to look at these assumptions as well as their effects on the conception of the political. This requires taking a closer look at the axiom that the relation between ‘ability’ and ‘making a difference’ corresponds to cause and effect. It also calls for looking at how the take on power influences the ways in which politics and democracy are conceived.

To avoid a priori assumptions as to the nature of ability – what realist accounts often refer to as the causal powers of agents, structures or systems (Harré, Bhaskar, Sayers) – Foucault sees ability as constituted vis-à-vis making a difference, and hence that they mutually condition each other. Thus, power is a practice category (Patton), which can be conceived in terms of agonism (Foucault, Connolly),

articulation (Laclau and Mouffe), reciprocal interaction and dialogue (Falzon). Ability and making a difference are entangled in each other in the sense the former is the retroactive effect of the latter. This circularity dislocates cause and effect, which forms part of an argument against empiricist and realist concepts of causation, and by extension, power. Instead, circularity implies focusing on the context, which, on the one hand, frames the making of differences, and on the other, is itself made up of this making. The circular and generic nature of power suggests that it is immanent in social relations (Foucault 1977a: 148-56; Žižek 1991: 198, 202-3), which indicates that the latter takes form through contexts and hence through limits in which ability is produced retroactively by its effects.

Foucault's writings in the 1970s left the impression of an uneasy balance between productive and repressive facets of power, as well as between power and resistance. The productivity of power, which was largely identified with discipline, did away with the constitutive subject, but at the prize of turning it into an economically efficient and politically obedient subject.<sup>1</sup> This raised the problem of the relation between power and domination as well as how resistance was at all possible given the omnipresence of power.<sup>2</sup> The question was whether the subject really was enslaved by a disciplinary power that is all the more diabolic as it constitutes everyone and everything and from which no escape seems possible.

As there were no essential subject left once layers of 'internalised' repression were peeled off, the question arose if there was more to the subject than the political technology underpinning productive subordination. This technology operated as an "infra-law" and did not obey "the juridico-discursive representation" of power with its contractually based equality (Foucault 1979: 222-3). The 'micro' politics of disciplinary power was different from power as law, and hence the democratic political system of representation by political parties. But did this have to mean that the only viable alternative to the constitutive subject would have to be a constitutively repressed subject from which no escape was possible? An 'iron case' political vision as it were.

Foucault's discussion of governmentality suggests something different by focusing on the performative role of politics as a type of practice which is autonomous vis-à-vis other types of practices, and which deals with authority. As a politics of the ordinary or the conventional it is concerned with what could be described as the existence of a political community (in Easton's sense of the term), that is, the co-existence of differences. Governmentality also throws light on Foucault's earlier considerations on power – or relevant for understanding the workings of power – which are not coined in terms of discipline, but is caught up in the transgression of limits, contestations and breaches. The argument I want to pursue in the following

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault holds that "discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)". Foucault 1979: 138, see also 209, 218, 220-1. This does not, of course, exhaust Foucault's approach to disciplinary technologies and how they are related to the forms of rationality in modern society. Cf. Smart 1985: 85-93, 136-41. See also McNay's (1994: 91-104) discussion of some of the ambiguities in Foucault's writings.

<sup>2</sup> Numerous authors, particularly of a Marxist orientation criticise Foucault on this point. See e.g. Fine 1979; 1984: 189-202; Jessop 1987; Keat 1986; Philp 1983; Poulantzas 1978: 77-80, 146-53; Wickham 1986: 152-68.

is that a Foucauldian take on power would emphasise that it is a generic category, which can come into existence in all sorts of political technologies. It would also stress the function of limits and hence the necessity of a political ordering of contexts and the systematisation of differences that makes co-existence possible.

The aim is to give an idea of how power can be conceptualised as an overarching category, which is generic, practical and strategical, non-deterministic as well as non-objective, and finally as analytically sustainable. This would in the first place require that political technologies aiming at efficiency and social control through discipline and normalisation have to be seen as modalities of power. They are, in other words, historically contingent forms of power, which operate on the regime level (again Easton) as a hegemonic bloc of domination, as opposed to, for example, being 'the' modern form of power.<sup>3</sup> It looks as if the most consequential way to rebut the repressive hypothesis consists in arguing that power as such is an overarching category, which says nothing about its function or location.

Although Foucault did not launch a definition of power, it could be argued that he outlined a perspective on power centred around the ability to make a difference. By making this move, concepts such as repression, domination, control, dependency, and so forth, become sub-categories of the concept of power, which cannot be entailed by the concept itself. The extent to which they play a role is thus irrelevant for whether or not power is operative. It follows that it is not possible to define power as repressive and/or productive or instrumental for hegemonic strategies. Nor is it the case that the function of power can be defined in relation to society's 'needs' as in functionalism, just as the nature of power cannot be pinned down in a set of positively given properties. The point is rather to see how power as the ability to make a difference is articulated with power as the name of a complex strategical situation (1981: 93).

## **Foucault's take on power**

Even though Foucault would probably be sceptical as to possibility of outlining a conceptual structure of power, his power analytics can, nonetheless, be seen as going in that direction. It provides a way of grasping power as an overarching category, just as it offers a perspective of how political identity is structured. This take on the problem of power is important for grasping how his discussion of governmentality articulates power, knowledge and ethics, which frame his understanding of the political. Five arguments are important here:

*First. Power in mainstream political theory.* The way in which power is for the most understood in political theory leaves the important question unanswered concerning the relation between power and identity, as well as power and politics. The consequence is that certain presuppositions are built into the ways in which power and politics are conceived: that power is a causal concept, which measures performance quantitatively in relation to the chance of getting one's way despite resistance, which in turn implies conflict.

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<sup>3</sup> This has been drawn attention to by amongst others Foucault 1979: 215; 1982: 225-6; 1984a: 380; Falzon 1998: 44, 51; Ivison 1997: 42; 1998: 139; McNay 1994: 126; Patton 1998: 67-9; Smart 1985: 90.



*Second. Power and the political:* There is a close relation between the ways in which power and the political are perceived. The political is typically identified with the state in terms of location and functional principle, where the latter refers to legitimate domination. The articulation between location and function has had the effect that the political has been coined in terms of subjection to law (Foucault 1980e: 140-1; 1980c: 201; 1988: 14). This means that political authority has been reduced to legitimacy, which has been further boiled down to consensus in the latter half of the Twentieth Century (Beetham 1991: Ch. 1; Nielsen 1988: 112). This reduction further underpins the assumption that politics revolves around the state.

*Third. The location and function of political power:* The articulation between location and function equips political power with form and content, which Foucault argues are historically contingent. This has consequences not only for how one understands the relation between power and politics, but also for the view that power can be determined as potentials in agents and structures. Foucault aims at clarifying how doing is related to ability, which is a question of the ways in which the subject is constituted. His argument is that both power and the subject should be understood as non-substantive (Foucault 1980b: 117; 1980c: 198) to give full weight to the historical constitution of the subject, and to avoid modelling the political in the image of the subject.

*Fourth. Foucault's overarching concept of power:* Foucault's reflections on power – which revolve around identity as constructed relationally, self and other, contingency, strategical situation and fundamental reversal – suggest that he is trying to outline a concept of power which is immanent in discourse (power-knowledge). Power thus understood cannot be reduced to its modalities, but is an overarching concept. Two points are important here, which revolve around the question of power/ethics is geared to the political question of co-existence. First, such a concept is placed at the centre of his discussion of ethics, of how the self constitutes itself vis-à-vis others, and that this articulation is the vehicle of power. The key distinction is between power and domination, the latter being seen as the abuse of power. Political power deals with how to draw the line between use and abuse. Second, it sees attempts to govern the articulation between power and ethics as constitutive for the political function and for the location of politics. Governing is concerned with deciding in the name of reasonable limits on power, of where to draw the lines between use and abuse of power.

*Fifth. Foucault's discussion of governmentality:* Foucault's stress on the articulation between power, identity and politics is important for grasping what is at stake in his discussions of the art of government (Foucault 1988: 19; 1991: 87-91). These discussions provide a theoretical underpinning of the shift from government to governance by taking issue with two assumptions: that the political terrain is reduced to the state as a network of political elites and that political authority is reduced to legitimacy. To approach power, identity and politics from a governmentality perspective has consequences for how a democratic ordering of political power springs from the articulation between power, identity, ethics and politics.

## Foucault's criticism of theories of power

A typical problem facing studies of power is that they, on the one hand, view power in very broad terms whilst, on the other, they narrow it down to make it operational. To illustrate the schism between general and specific uses of the term it will be useful to look at Weber and Dahl. Although Weber does not start from the etymology of power (the ability to make a difference) but proposes a more narrow definition he cannot avoid the dilemma. Power is, says Weber (1978: 53, see also 926), "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests".

To define power along these lines Weber makes two assumptions about power, which are particularly relevant in this connection.

*First. Power as domination.* Power is defined as the will to dominate and hence the will and probability to curb resistance. Compliance v. autonomy is a defining feature of power. There is also an antinomy between power and reason, because the latter is anchored in the autonomous subject. Power is opposed to reason by being defined as the type of conduct encroaching upon that which is free in the sense of being defined independently of power, that is, the will of somebody else. Negative conceptions of freedom from political power as well as emancipatory discourses that envision the end of politics share this view. Power, freedom and politics are intertwined because they raise the question how community as the co-existence of differences can be conceived.

*Second. Power and resistance.* "Weber's definition also assumes that power is only real or effective where it cannot be resisted, as if the mere fact that an action *elicits* another's resistance were not already proof of the power relation between them" (Allen 1998: 177). Two things are important here. First, power is power only if it meets resistance and suppresses it. Resistance is necessary for power, but it also has to play a subordinate role, which indicates that the definition of power as domination is entangled in what Derrida has called the logic of the supplement (Derrida 1976: Part II, Ch. 2). Thus 'power over' entails clashes between interests, and these conflicts can only be solved through subjection that institutes a hierarchy of domination and subordination. Order can then only be thought of as a particular way of structuring domination, which is capable of bending resistance. A democratic political order is no exception. Second, in talking about an action eliciting another's resistance, and that this is already a proof of the relation of power, draws attention to the terrain of power relations. Foucault's focus on how power and knowledge form ability poses two questions: how it is possible to view power as the becoming of ability vis-à-vis making a difference; and how the subject can govern and ought to govern itself and others. His approach to power focuses on the articulation between individuality and communality, and it links ethics and politics together from the outset (Moss 1998: 153-6).

Weber describes power as "sociologically amorphous", because it is omnipresent and because "domination in the quite general sense of power, i.e., of the possibility of imposing one's own will upon the behavior of other persons, can emerge in the

most diverse forms” (Weber 1978: 942, see also 53). Power is omnipresent just as its form and content varies infinitely. “All conceivable qualities of a person and all conceivable combinations of circumstances may put him in a position to impose his will in a given situation” (Weber 1978: 53). To provide power with form and content, to locate it in contexts, relate it to circumstances, and to make it causally effective, Weber chooses to look at “Herrschaft”, that is, domination by virtue of authority, which concerns “the probability that a *command* will be obeyed” (Weber 1978: 53, 943). The form and content thus provided is, however, a reductionist account of power and how it is related to politics. Weber focuses on the power that finds expression in legitimate political domination whose locus is the state. Two reductions are operative in Weber’s argument: power is defined as domination, and political power is defined as legitimate domination.

A similar move can be observed in Dahl from a broad definition of power akin to Weber’s to a specific focus on decision-making in representative political institutions. “A has power over B”, says Dahl (1957: 204), “to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do”. Power is studied in terms of event-causation, which looks at changes in B’s behaviour. These are measured in relation to a hypothetical counterfactual standard of what B would have done if A had not exercised power, which is the yardstick of autonomy against which difference is measured (Rajchman 1985: 89). In his later comments on the debate on the “three faces of power” (Bachrach and Baratz’s non-decisions and Lukes’s no-decisions), Dahl notes that power not only exhibits two or even three faces. Rather there are “an indefinite number of critical links in the chain of causation and therefore an indefinite number of ‘faces’ of power” (Dahl 1984: 33).

To study power empirically Dahl chooses to focus on decision-making in political systems, which he defines as “any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, control, influence, power, or authority” (Dahl 1984: 10). An equivalence is forged here between control, influence, power and authority whose target is the subject and its subjection as a condition for social order. It is in these terms the political system is identified, which is further narrowed down to representative political bodies (Dyrberg 1997: 41-8). It is worth noting the similarity between the conceptions of power and politics. It goes for both of them that they are viewed in broad terms although they are defined within the parameters of domination, and are geared toward regime structures. Thus, Dahl’s discussions of power and politics are oriented towards its formal and legitimate sites where the basic analytical unit is decision-making based on explicitly stated policy preferences, which can be studied in terms of causation. Again, it is a question of conflicting wills, and of presupposing and eliminating resistance.

The view of power taking shape here revolves around five ideas which are broader than the behavioural viewpoints.

*First. The reduction of difference to asymmetry:* Power is asymmetrical which is to say that it concerns having and/or exercising power over others, which in turn means that politics revolves around the organisation of domination. This implies that power is conceived and operationalised in terms of conflicts of preferences or interests, which is the reason why politics entails domination. Whether conflicts are praised as necessary or destabilising for the dynamics of social relations, the reduction of difference to asymmetry portrays a stifled view of power and politics. It goes hand

in hand with a reductionist and elitist view of the function and location of the political, which has consequences for how democracy is conceived.

*Second. Power revolves around agency, structure or system:* Power revolves around the connections between agency, structure and system, with a focus on its exercise as well as how agents can draw upon resources. The problem is not so much that of scrutinising these connections (e.g. how agency and structure interact with each other) than it is to see how they are formed by particular images of power. From the point of view of distinguishing power from its abuse – which is the critical political axis of power, knowledge and ethics in Foucault (1984; 1988; 1988a,b,c) – the more important question is that of individuality in relation to communality. This requires understanding political reason as ingrained in power relations.

*Third. Power as quantity:* Power is a quantifiable strength that can be possessed or dispossessed. Usually, it is agents who possess or dispossess power, but it can also be structures and systems. Thus, power can be measured in terms of the degree of compliance agents can muster by exercising control, influence, power or authority. The assumption that power is quantitative is, for instance, expressed in discussions of whether power relations are zero-sum or plus-sum. The former assumes that power entails resistance and that this resistance is curbed, which is to say that power is unthinkable without a conflict (Weber and Dahl). The latter does not make this assumption, but argues that the total amount of power can be increased in the pursuit of common goals (Arendt and Parsons).

*Fourth. Power is causation:* Power is causal, which is to say that the relation between ability and effect has to be temporally and spatially separated, which means that ability can be specified independent of effects. In opposition to structuralist and realist conceptions, behaviourism puts ability between brackets and looks exclusively on performance as behaviour. The power relation between A and B points at the difference between what B is actually doing and what B would have done in the absence of this relation as a difference between compliance and autonomy. What power adds to causation is this latter difference, which cannot be insulated from political ethics. Yet, the latter is screened out of the definition of power as the relation between power and domination cannot be raised as a problem since power *is* domination, and hence has nothing to do with ethics. This problem can only be raised by questioning the reductionist definition of power.

*Fifth. Power as attribution:* Power is “attributed to persons or collectivities or, sometimes, to systems or structures with which they act” (Lukes 1978: 635). However, it is not clear what it means to attribute power to something in the first place. “To identify the power of an individual, or a class, or a social system, one must”, claims Lukes (1978: 634-5; see also 1974: 26), “have a theory of the nature – that is, the causal powers – of individuals, classes or social systems”. The nature of social entities is equated with their causal powers, but this can hardly avoid being tautological because it collapses the distinction between doing and ability: ‘to identify the power of X, one must have a theory of the causal powers of X’. But if X cannot utilise its causal powers it makes little sense to say that X ‘has’ power. The problem is that the notion of attribution oscillates between being a contingent predicate as when X has power in a given context, and an essential property which refers to the nature/causal powers of X.

## Power, politics and democracy

Weber's take on power in terms of domination is not as sociologically amorphous as he claims. Weber and Dahl's decision to shift attention to the characterisation of the power of agents' performance within legitimate political sites is not an innocent move, as it were. It does not simply testify to the need of rendering power operational as if the way in which the concept of power was not contestable. Something happens to power and politics in these reductions, which largely remain non-theorised presuppositions.

There are three problems with these reductions, which Foucault takes issue with. They concern, first, the conception of power, including the relation between power and domination; second, the relationship between power and politics; and third, the relationship between power, politics and democracy.

*First. Power and domination.* It is necessary to move from the definitions of power at the regime level to the underlying assumptions on which the broad definitions of power rely, and then further to the perspective of power as the ability to make a difference. For Foucault this means to move from a "juridico-discursive representation of power", where the subject is defined in relation to law, to an "analytics of power" that looks at the materiality of power, the constitution of identity (Foucault 1981: 81-91). This is required to grasp the conceptual structure of power without modelling it in the image of asymmetry, causation, quantity, conflict/consensus and agency/structure. Foucault's perspective on power exhibits three characteristics, all of which can be inferred from the ability to make a difference.

The approach to power is that of the becoming of identity vis-à-vis limits/contexts, which are vehicles of exercising and measuring the impact of power. In this anti-foundationalist perspective, it is not possible to explain power in terms of something that would be more fundamental in the sense of being somehow given. Power cannot, for example, be derived from agency or structure as if these categories were given beforehand, which means that identification vis-à-vis power is constitutive as opposed to derivative.

The non-derivative nature of power implies that it cannot be an object (Foucault 1981: 93). Foucault's point is that it cannot be equipped with form and content independently of the complex strategical situations in which it appears. Power only exists as articulation, which means that it cannot be a causal concept since that would be to assume what Foucault does not: that ability could be specified independently of making a difference, and hence independently of the contexts that frame the exercise of power.

Something that defies being turned into an object, that is, given form and content a priori, cannot be determinate either; or, what amounts to the same, that the relation between ability and doing is not one of entailment. The relation between ability and performance is instead marked by reciprocal conditioning. Power is as Haar (1985: 12) says, in relation to Nietzsche's will to power, a direction forever to be determined. This should be seen in relation to the subject as free – that it is seen as being able to pursue different options (Foucault 1982: 220-2).

These points are important for grasping how power, politics and democracy are articulated with each other. What is important here is to take issue with the often implicit axiom that the function of power is domination, and that it is located at the regime level. These reductions are arbitrary when seen from the point of view of the sociologically amorphous nature of power. This does not mean, however, that nothing can be implied from power as the ability to make a difference. The sociologically amorphous nature of power calls for understanding it in terms of complex strategical situations, which code power relations and provides the context or parameters for grasping what the ability to make a difference means.

*Second. Power and politics:* It will also be necessary to discuss how the relation between power and politics is conceived. Two things are important here.

The three assumptions that go into the overarching definition of power – that it is non-objective, non-derivative, and non-determinate – have consequences for how political power is viewed. It is problematic to define political power as having a specific location such as the sovereign nation state, and that it is hierarchical and operates by way of domination, control, and so on. To view power in terms of complex strategical situations draws attention to the situational articulation and historical configuration of power, knowledge and ethics as the political articulation par excellence. It is this light Foucault's notion of governmentality should be seen, which revolves around self/other or individuality/communality.

In an era where the sovereignty of the nation state is declining, politics increasingly becomes a prerogative of elites operating in various institutions and networks (Bang et al. 1997: 12-22; Bang and Dyrberg 1999a,b; Etzioni-Halevy 1993: Ch. 5; Rose 1996: 49-58; Rose 1996a: 347-52; Scharpf 1998: 15-6). These elites have little or no representative democratic legitimacy, and the rationality of governance found in elite networks are at odds with the principles of representative democracy, which are based on a clear division of labour between political leadership, bureaucracy and the citizenry. This implies that distinctions such as state/civil society and public/private loose ground as the organising matrix for politics and political identification (Foucault 1991a: 163-4; Gordon 1991: 23; Smart 1986: 162).

These two points lead to a paradox of sorts. Weber's idea of studying power in terms of "Herrschaft", to avoid dealing with the problem of the sociologically amorphous nature of power, makes less empirical sense today where "Herrschaft" appears increasingly amorphous. The sovereignty principle, the unitary and hierarchical bureaucracy, as well as principles of legitimacy and representative democracy are ill suited to cope with shifts from government to governance. These shifts concern the formulation and implementation of politics from a centralised hierarchy with a clear-cut division of labour between politicians, bureaucrats and citizens within the nation state to less hierarchically organised governance networks, different means of inclusion/exclusion, which among other things refer to changes in access to political forums and patterns of political recognition, all of which are not necessarily limited by nation-state boundaries.

*Third. Power, politics and democracy:* The theoretical articulation between power and politics, as well as the historical changes in this relationship, has consequences for the conception of democracy. If it is seen as a way of organising political power it obviously matters a great deal what democracy organises and how it organises it. The question of the nature and scope of democracy are important here.

If democracy is confined within the parameters of 'power over' and the representative institutions within the state, it will increasingly come under siege by networking elites, and the power struggles between and their resistance to be subjected to popular pressures (Bauman 1998: 18-20, 69-76). This threat to democracy erodes one of its core principles, namely that of equality. This is all the more visible as the declining importance of the nation state, as the organising matrix for representative democracy, implies that there are no real checks and balances on these elites. The point is not only that pluralism becomes slanted toward elitism. It is also that representative democracy and power as law cannot fulfil the task it was assigned of mapping out the overarching framework within which politics takes place and acts in the name of or as a guarantor of popular sovereignty.

If, on the other hand, the parameters of repressive power and the state are questioned it will be possible to argue that democracy does not have to rely on state hierarchy, and that the alternative to the latter does not have to be a pluralistic kind of elite domination. Power as law does not exhaust the politics of co-existing differences, but seems rather to be a strategy geared to monopolise and domesticate the political in an ongoing warfare (Deleuze 1986: 38; Dyrberg 1997: 103-5). Foucault's argument that political authority is broader than the legitimate authority of the state suggests that it is based on conventionality, which extends the scope of power and the political, and hence democracy (Dyrberg 1997: 105-11). Foucault's discussion of governmentality offers a perspective on the articulation of power, politics and democracy that aims to get at the functional principle of the political.

The task is to sketch a perspective that revolves around the double conditioning between ability and capacity, on the one hand, and doing and performance on the other. Here it is vital to avoid a priori assumptions that give the study of power a specific political slant (cf. Weber and Dahl). The reduction of power to 'power over' and the parallel reduction of politics to domination/subordination as well as its reduction to what goes on at the regime level can serve as examples. Foucault's analyses of political technologies can contribute to a different understanding of the relationship between power and politics where the emphasis is put on the structuring of social relations, orders and identities. Three points concerning his power analytics are important here.

*First.* Foucault's governmentality perspective cannot be boxed into the dichotomies between, for example, system/life-world, state/civil society, structure/agency, power over/power to and freedom from/freedom to. On the contrary, his perspective is overarching compared to these dichotomies by emphasising that power and politics revolve around ordering social relations. This implies that politics cannot be defined in derivative terms – as responding to needs and conflicts in a social order – but has its own specificity and autonomy.

*Second.* He does not assume what are, in effect, the terminal forms of power – “the regulated and legitimate forms of power in their central locations” (Foucault 1982: 217). That is, the sovereignty of the state, the privilege of the law and the over-all unity of forms of domination given at the outset. Instead, he focuses on power as the vehicle for the articulation of strategies, interests, identities, structures, and so on, which find expression in all sorts of contexts.

*Third.* To provide a perspective on how to approach power does not explain the actual articulation of power relations. As Foucault (1991a: 148; see also Foucault 1988f: 104; Minson 1986: 128-30; Morriss 1987: 44) makes explicit, power is always in need of being explained. What a perspective can do is to provide a direction as to what to look for, and how to look at it, which avoids reductionist and deterministic assumptions.

## **Power and the transgression of limits: retroactive causation**

From a Foucauldian perspective, power exhibits a circular movement. The ability to make a difference suggests that ability be embodied in a subject and constitutes it through its actions. The subject is in this respect the vehicle for power, and more specifically, for political technologies. The question is how ability should be understood when it is the retroactive effect of 'making a difference'. What should difference be compared to when the opposition is abandoned between compliance and autonomy as in, for instance, the debate on the three faces of power? The notion of limit plays an essential role here.<sup>4</sup> The ability to make a difference can be seen as a limit between two situations that refers to a temporal and spatial systematisation of differences constituting a field of action (Foucault 1982: 221). Power revolves around identification and self-reference by systematising differences and positing limits as presupposed. This indicates the connection between power, politics and ethics, which are the central themes in Foucault's discussions of governmentality. Two things should be noted here:

*First. The opposition between power and violence/force:* the latter is seen as the limit of the former, because the scope of action has been eliminated, whereby the subject has been rendered passive (Foucault 1982: 219-21; 1988c: 83-4; Barker 1998: 37-40; Falzon 1998: 48-9, 59; McNay 1994: 126-9). It is in this light Foucault's statement can be understood that "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized" (Foucault 1982: 221).

*Second. The opposition between freedom and limitation:* freedom as the possibility of acting is inseparable from establishing fields of action, that is, systematising differences that revolves around inclusion/exclusion. As such, there is no opposition. "But a system of constraint becomes truly intolerable when the individuals who are affected by it don't have the means of modifying it" (Foucault 1988d: 294). As opposed to physical violence, this form of force can be established by scientific and moral imperatives, which are hegemonised as political imperatives. Racism and sexism can serve as examples, both of which have scientific and moral dimensions.

The reciprocal conditioning between capacity and performance, or ability and doing, makes up a relation of power, which orbit around instigating directions through decisions, but also through habits, routines and modes of conducting oneself in relation to others. The ability to make a difference cannot be located,

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<sup>4</sup> The notions of limit and transgression are among other places discussed in Foucault 1972: 578; 1977: 30-6; 1977b: 79-80; 1984: 45; 1991b: 31-2; see also Bernauer and Mahon 1994; Deleuze 1994: 317-9, 331; Lemert and Gillan 1982: 25-8, 63-70; McNay 1994: 40-7, 145-9; O'Farrell 1989: Ch. 4-6; Simons 1995: Ch. 3, 7-8.



circumscribed or identified. It always loses track of itself when it tries to position and identify itself *as it is*, which indicates that “the unthought that conditions knowledge is power” (Hoy 1988: 13). Power is not a “mysterious property whose origin must be delved into” (Foucault 1988c: 83). Ability returns as the organising mythical matrix of self-reference when it comes to systematising differences. To be able to act should not then be seen as something given in relation to the action, which is why the latter cannot be understood as a causal mechanism regardless of whether it is coined in terms of will, structure or system.

As the ability to make a difference – that is, as a generic and practical category – power is a strategic construct through and through (Foucault 1982: 224-6; 1988: 15-6). It is a name of an amorphous and non-locatable place, which processes of identification continuously have to posit as their presupposition to orient, define and determine themselves in situations. It is in this sense one can speak of a circular structure of power. Power has to be defined as the limit, whose transgression takes the form of a recoiling movement in which ability establishes itself before its effects as a hollow reference point. The becoming of identity is self-referential in the sense that the self as a structural locus is the overarching and empty reference point whilst also being constituted in this referring. The subject has accordingly no substance, but is historical and ordinary (Strong 1994: 93, 146). This is the reason why power cannot be located or identified, and why one always loses track of it when trying to position and identify it. Ability returns as the organising mythical matrix of self-reference when it comes to systematising differences. To be able to act should not then be seen as given in relation to the action, which is why the latter cannot be understood as a causal mechanism.

When ‘making’ is a process around which ‘difference’ orbits, the subject that embodies the ability to make a difference is a metaphor for the becoming of identity through identification. The latter implies constructing temporal limits between future and past, and spatial limits between part and whole. By thus positioning itself, the subject situates and governs itself in relation to other subjects in specific contexts. As becoming vis-à-vis limits it is impossible to conceptualise power proper if by that we mean that it refers to ‘something’ which is unaffected by this becoming. Power is more like a name for ‘that’ which plays a constitutive role for identity, but which has no identity itself. It is in this sense Foucault talks about power as limit and transgression.

To conceptualise power as the becoming of ability vis-à-vis limits has to be prior to analysing what for Lasswell defined the subject matter of political analysis, namely who exercises power, how and why, or who gets what, when and how (Gunnell 1993: 124; see also Foucault 1988f: 103). The reason is that these questions presuppose what cannot be taken for granted here, namely the existence of agents in specific contexts that are able to mobilise resources, draw upon rules, and so on, in order to get their way despite resistance, in a word, a will to dominate. By grasping power in terms of becoming, Foucault asserts that power is ingrained in the subject and in social relations in general. Thus becoming is open-ended, as it were, or rather, it is as Haar says a direction forever to be determined.

As the temporal and spatial limit, which poses *and* presupposes ability, power is the limit constituting identity (Bernauer and Mahon 1994: 143). Identity is contingent upon becoming. Power marks the fissure of identity, and it is in relation to these limits that the subject positions and identifies itself through modes of identification

(Stavrakakis 1999: 33-4, 37). This implies that a non-essentialist conception of power has to proceed in terms of the retroactive constitution of ability through making a difference.

The circularity that pertains to power has a direct bearing on Foucault's perspective, because he analyses power as the *making* of the subject or the *becoming* of identity. It is in this light one could understand his statement that we have "to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework", and that "[p]ower in the substantive sense, '*le pouvoir*', doesn't exist" (Foucault 1980b: 117; Foucault 1980c 198; see also 1981: 93; 1988c 83). To flesh out a concept of power on these lines, power has to be approached as becoming vis-à-vis limits. When power is located in the fissure within the self, as well as in the relation between self and other, power refers to otherness within the self, which throws the subject into processes of identification where the subject relates to itself vis-à-vis others. The self cannot escape power because it is constituted vis-à-vis otherness. That is, it cannot be identical with itself because selfness is conditioned by otherness.

The notion of the subject has, according to Foucault, a double meaning: "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (Foucault 1982: 212, see also 208; Deleuze 1994: 323). This is not an 'iron cage' view of a power that dominates everything which is internalised by the subject that, accordingly, becomes modelled in its image. Such a "repressive hypothesis" would have to assume that power has an image or that it encroaches upon the self that would otherwise be self-identical.<sup>5</sup>

However, as limit and its transgression, power cannot have substance or objectivity. Moreover, it has no determinate direction in consequence of which becoming or difference is prior to causation and will (Nietzsche 1969: 235-6). Power is more like a name for the non-identity within identity that sparks off identification, but which cannot be conceptualised proper, because it has no positively identifiable properties, but only exists in 'its' effects. The relational constitution of identity implies that to speak of identity, relations have to coagulate, meaning that limits have to be enforced between clusters of identifications. Power refers to this clustering or systematisation of relations that are glued together, partly, by strategies, tactics and decisions/non-decisions vis-à-vis events, circumstances, and so forth; and partly by forms of life, habits, routines, and so on, that make up what is ordinary. These scenarios structure, and in turn institutionalise, a terrain of forces in which the subject finds itself.

## The circular structuring of identity

The ability to make a difference is itself constituted by the actual making of differences, which retroactively construes the locus of this making as presupposed

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. the liberal view of power as the opposite to autonomy, which places the legitimation of political power in a delicate problem "of both restraining the coercive power of government while claiming its authority to be based on consent, and to promote the general interest", Lukes 1978: 652.

as the nature or causal powers of individuals, structures or systems. Opposite the transcendental realism of, for instance Bhaskar (1989: Ch. 2), which sees capacities as ‘real mechanisms’ generating social interaction, one of the central features of power as limit revolves around this positing of its presuppositions. We can now turn to Foucault’s statement that “one needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation” (Foucault 1981: 93; see also Foucault 1979: 215).<sup>6</sup>

Keeping in mind Lukes’s discussion of attribution – that power can be attributed to agents, structures or systems – it should be clear that Foucault uses this word very differently. He never launched a *theory* of power, as that would imply relying on a prior objectification or naturalisation such as the causal powers of subjects, structures or systems (Foucault 1980c: 199; 1981: 82; Lemert and Gillan 1982: 116). It is presuppositions like these he wants to avoid with his nominalistic approach that underlines the intertwined nature of power and knowledge, which is geared toward conducting oneself and others. Every attempt to endow power with a specific identity, form or manifestation belongs to the strategical game of power itself. The point is that discourses *on* power cannot be strictly separated from discourses *of* power, which means that ontology and epistemology cannot be sharply differentiated. “There is never”, says Foucault, “an *interpretandum* that is not already *interpretans*”, which, according to Mahon (1992: 116), points “to our immediate practical and discursive handling of life that makes it intelligible and, thereby, constitutes a primordial interpretation”.

To attribute a name (‘power’) to an object (‘a complex strategical situation’) is an act, and this means that attribution cannot be a passive application of a name to an object whose unity is constituted extra-discursively. On the contrary, as a performative act, attribution makes a difference, which is to say that it partakes in constituting both the object and the subject engaged in this act. So, one need not be a nominalist. Laclau puts it succinctly when he says, “if the unity of the object is the retroactive effect of naming itself, then naming is not just the pure nominalistic game of attributing an empty name to a preconstituted subject. It is the discursive construction of the object itself” (Laclau 1989: xiv; see also Žižek 1989: 92-7). It is in this sense one can speak of the discursive as constitutive of identity.

Instead of defining power by carving out a common denominator of all those entities that ‘have’ power – an ability in the objects that equips these with a nature and causal powers – Foucault claims that power cannot be possessed or dispossessed (Foucault 1981: 94). The reason is that power is not a substance that can be attributed to agency, structure or system as if these or other categories were given independently of relations of power relations, and the act of attribution did not do something to them.

Foucault would no doubt agree with Weber’s assertion that power is “sociologically amorphous”, but in contrast to Weber it is Foucault’s argument that the non-substantial view of power as limit implies that it should be grasped in terms of the structuring of situations. The systematisation of differences positions subjects and

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<sup>6</sup> See also Nietzsche’s (1969a: 27) claim that “Wollen scheint mir vor allem etwas Kompliziertes, etwas, das nur als Wort eine Einheit ist”. See moreover Rajchman’s discussion of Foucault’s “historical nominalism”, 1985: 50-60.

constitutes identity. Power is non-substantial by referring to a “complex strategical situation” that positions subjects and structure signification. What is at stake here is “the calling into question of the theory of the subject” (Foucault, 1991c: 58, see also 49, 56-8; Foucault 1980d: 186). It is through the temporal and spatial positing of identity the subject becomes – or alternatively, does not become – able to act in given situations. It is, moreover, in this process that power is constructed retroactively as ‘nature’, which as the unthought evades being grasped. Nature is something alien the subject has to cope with, which at the same time posits its individuality (Foucault 1972: 191, 458, 548; see also Racevskis 1983: 43-51).

Power is above all a matter of contestation, and “to contest is”, says Foucault, “to proceed until one reaches the empty core where being achieves its limit and where the limit defines being” (Foucault 1977: 36; see also 1988a: 146).<sup>7</sup> Identification revolves around this empty core, which is given a direction when the subject is positioned, and positions itself, in complex strategical situations. Ability is another name for the empty core or non-place, which can only exist by transgressing itself. The subject in turn as the embodiment of ability is an empty signifier, which is mapped out by power relations. Ability as becoming is also the point of recurrence. The making of identity is not just a haphazard proliferation of differences, but a grounding of identity *as it is* vis-à-vis the self-referential nature of retroactive causation (Dyrberg 1997: Ch. 5).

Foucault (1981: 155) emphasises the circular structure of identity in drawing attention to “the fundamental reversal” which he discusses in relation to power and sex. Power/knowledge produces sex as an object for knowledge and for strategies of social control, which are two sides of the same coin. Sex is construed as nature, as a “secret causality” predating power, which power can encroach upon, which means that sex is naturalised and power is turned into an external dead weight impinging upon it. The constitutive subject and the repressive hypothesis thus condition each other in much the same way as autonomy and compliance does. Here it is important to stress two things.

*First.* Ability is retroactively construed as a causal and meaning-giving principle, a fictitious unity, which is, nonetheless, in a constant process of becoming what it is vis-à-vis its discursive construction.

*Second.* Political technologies and hegemonic strategies shape ability within specific contexts. The fundamental reversal points out that the positing of presuppositions is a performative act governing the formation of identity.

The stress on the retroactive constitution of meaning and the fundamental reversal are important for grasping Foucault’s argument against those who see power as encroaching upon the subject from the outside. Ability is an effect that is transfigured as the cause. For Nietzsche, the will to power is the origin of values, but says Haar, “this origin cannot be reduced to a primordial unity, to any kind of

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<sup>7</sup> The same point is raised in his discussion of reason and madness. Reason is constituted in the form of alienation since it, on the one hand, excludes madness from its domain whilst trying to domesticate it. Yet, on the other hand, since reason can only define itself through the other, it has to define “itself on the basis of this exclusion”, whereupon otherness is constitutive for the self. Foucault 1967: ix-x; 1972: 548; Boyne 1990: 80-6; O’Farrell 1989: 68-77; Racevskis 1983: 47-8.

identity, because it is nothing but a direction forever to be determined”, which “has and gives meaning only in retrospect” (Haar 1985: 12; see also Foucault 1977a: 151-2). Barthes’s discussion of denotation as the last connotation conveys a similar idea: the last connotation provides functions, elements, conducts, sensations and pleasures with a ‘reading principle’. “[D]enotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the *last* of the connotations (the one which seems both to establish and to close the reading)” (Barthes 1974: 9). In making sense of this non-ordered myriad of things, it attempts to turn them into an imaginary unity that can function as a causal principle, which is distinct from and thus external to what it produces. This last connotation has mutated itself into an ordering principle, which is, seemingly, beyond the field of signification and hence power (Foucault 1981: 124, 152-7).

Zizek argues on similar lines when he holds that “the subject is constituted as the ‘missing link’ of a causal chain”. Here there is a parallel to Dahl’s comment that there is “an indefinite number of critical links in the chain of causation and therefore an indefinite number of ‘faces’ of power” (Dahl 1984: 33). We have no other access to the subject than to trace the effects of the missing links in the causal chain – what Laclau calls dislocations. The subject takes the place of the origin that serves as a metaphor for the organising nexus around which ability constitutes itself. This means that the subject can only be constituted as an origin “by retroactively reorganizing its past, by reconstituting its origins backwards” (Zizek 1991: 203; see also Zizek 1994: 100-4). Otherwise put, “we continually reshape our past creations to conform to our present creative needs” (Hutton 1998: 137). Power is constitutive in that it cannot itself be grounded but grounds itself retroactively when it revolves around the void in identity or signification – limit, non-place or pure distance – which it attempts to fill in. Although power can only be traced through its effects, it cannot be fully accounted for in terms of these effects.

Ability – as the void where identity recoils into non-identity – is the point where the subject finds itself ‘as it is’ by making a difference. To ‘discover’ the self-identical blind spot and originating causal principle is to construct an imaginary unity resulting from identification. Hence the paradox that ability is a construction of something that is awaiting recognition, a discursive re-presentation of *that* which cannot present itself, because it is not a discursively valid object. Ability is the retroactive effect of the subject’s practices in the discursive field that attains the status of a ‘pre-discursive’ object that conditions doing, and which is the locus of the truth of the subject. To act or to make a difference transfigures itself as the effect of ability whose unity becomes the source of making a difference. The construction of identity retroactively takes the form of its excavation, which indicates that the fundamental reversal is decisive for the genealogical critique of the objectivation of becoming (Foucault 1977a; Hutton 1988: 129-30; May 1993: 99-104). It is a critique of power being turned into a fictitious object, which can ground the subject as well as being the reference point for truth claims. Genealogy points at the contradictory status of this object: that it is seen as an extra-discursive reality resisting signification, whilst it is also conceived as having positive existence.

## Power as an overarching concept

The argument I have been pursuing here is that in reflecting on Foucault's historical studies of power, such as disciplinary and normalising technologies, the historically contingent settings in which the subject is constituted in and by power relations have to be transcended. Foucault's aversion against grasping power and the subject in a substantive sense should be seen in this light. Instead of assuming power to have an objective referent, he stresses its non-objective nature and, by extension, that it is non-derivative and non-determinate. It is in this respect one could understand a non-objective account of power as "the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation". The complexity of situations refers to the instigation of directions in multi-dimensional fields of forces, as hence the enforcement of limits, both of which position and subjectivate the subject. By posing the question of power in terms of governmentality, we are, in effect, dealing with the fundamental question of political power and ethics of how the co-existence of differences is possible.

The complex strategical situation cannot be reduced to the strategies structuring a situation, because the former is an overall effect that cannot exist without the latter. The strategies equip this whole with form and content, but they also presuppose it as the terrain in which they operate and which conditions them. By distinguishing between strategy and complex strategical situation it will be possible to show how order, identity and objectivity are not only constituted in processes of ordering, identification and objectification. It will also be possible to see that these processes are self-referential by assuming identity, and that this retroactive logic, which is embodied in political technologies, reason and ethics, revolves around power as an empty place. Power strategies insert themselves in situations that condition them and which they at the same time make up. Neither part is able to determine the other. Instead, there is a reciprocal conditioning between local and general strategies as well as tactical reversals between them.<sup>8</sup>

Foucault's discussions of "care of the self", "the art of government" and "governmental technologies" deal with the political and ethical dimensions of the relationship between power and knowledge. When power is manifested as directions to be determined on an ongoing basis, which relates future and past, and when power in this way expresses that complex strategical situations create and connect ability and doing, then politics and ethics are geared toward governing power/knowledge. While politics deals with ordering differences to render co-existence possible, political ethics concerns the distinction between using and abusing power in relation to co-existing differences in the political community.

Political reason, and hence the relation between power, knowledge and ethics, cannot be evaluated by criteria of morality and truth cultivated within what Rawls calls "comprehensive doctrines". Political judgement and ethics are autonomous by being geared to what is acceptable in relation to co-existence, which is to say that its task is *not* to take a stance on epistemological and moral matters. There is a parallel

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault 1981: 99-102; see also Foucault 1991: 91-2 on upwards and downwards continuity; Butler 1997: 93-4; McNay 1994: 114; Trombadori 1991: 21.

here between Rawls's critique of Habermas and Foucault's discussion on the role of intellectuals. "In justice as fairness", says Rawls (1995: 174-5), "there are no philosophical experts. Heaven forbid! But citizens must, after all, have some ideas of right and justice in their thought and some basis for their reasoning. And students of philosophy take part in formulating these ideas but always as citizens among others". In a similar vein, Foucault argues that the job of an intellectual "is a matter of participating in the formation of a political will, where [the intellectual] is called to perform a role as citizen" (quoted in Goldstein 1991: 12).

Foucault's view of power as a "strategic game of liberties", directed toward "conducting the behaviour of others", implies focusing on how the self appropriates knowledge and how it is articulated with power. To care for and govern oneself and others in a "correct" manner necessitates drawing limits between using and abusing power (Foucault 1988: 19). This distinction obtains a central position in Foucault's discussion of governmentality, and is formulated as a distinct ethico-political problem centred on the axis of individuality/commonality.

To define power as the ability to make a difference means that power is grasped relationally, which is an argument against foundational or objectivist accounts. It also implies that power relations are those practices that revolve around limit and context, as it would be impossible to identify the former without the latter. Reference to limit and context is important for two reasons. First, it is concerned with the constitution of identity and signification vis-à-vis limit and context: what is acceptable and what is not, what is included and what is not, etc.? Second, it focuses on what it means to make a difference in relation to a context.

Distinctions such as acceptable/non-acceptable, inclusion/exclusion and tolerance/intolerance revolve around three closely connected aspects of articulation, namely those of the political, the ethical and the personal. To evoke these distinctions means to enforce limits, and hence to make a difference in relation to a context or a situation, which means that these distinctions are vehicles of power. This should be related to Foucault's argument about power as a complex strategical situation. The ability to make a difference only makes sense in relation to a context or situation.

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