

Foucault Studies

Below is the first complete English translation of the conference Foucault delivered under the title “La philosophie analytique de la politique” on his visit to Japan in 1978. The interest of this conference resides in the fact that it provides one of Foucault’s clearest accounts of his own approach to the analysis of power and practices of resistance. Foucault’s discourse is organized around the following initial question: how can philosophy still play its ancient role of “counter-power” in the face of the forms of domination marking 20th century Western societies? Foucault’s response to this question is premised upon his stark critique of the traditional juridico-political theories of power. As he argues at greater length in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, in fact, all these theories rely on a prior and universal representation of power as a homogeneous and unitarian essence, which not only remains inadequate to grasp the way “power is and was exercised”,¹ but also serves as a source of legitimation for modern institutions through the concealment of the concrete mechanisms of power. To the contrary, Foucault adopts a very different methodological attitude: rather than elaborating an overarching theory of power centred upon the study of the macro-level dimensions of the state and social hegemonies, Foucault engages in a series of historical investigations of “focal points of experience”² (like madness, criminality, and sexuality) in order to reveal the regional, unstable, and marginal cluster of force relations shaping our ordinary experience of power.

In this sense, Foucault delineates an unexpected convergence between his own approach and Anglo-American analytic philosophy, especially ordinary language philosophy as formulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein. The aim of ordinary language philosophy is to propose a “critical analysis of thought on the basis of the way one says things”, while rejecting any massive disqualification or qualification of language. Correspondingly, the task Foucault attributes to his “analytic philosophy of politics” or “analytico-political philosophy” is to examine “what ordinarily happens in power relations”, namely to describe the reality of power without falling prey to sweeping condemnations or appreciations.³ To state it otherwise, excluding any return to the ancient models of philosophy as prophecy, pedagogy or lawgiver, Foucault holds that today philosophy can maintain its critical role of counter-power only insofar as it abandons the moral and juridical vocabulary of “good” and “bad”, “right” and “wrong”, “legitimate” and “illegitimate” in favour of an analysis of power

1 M. Foucault (1978), *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction (The Will to Knowledge)*, trans. R. Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, pp. 87–8.

2 M. Foucault (2010), *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France (1982–83)*, eds. A. Davidson, F. Gros, F. Ewald, and A. Fontana, trans. G. Burchell, London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, p. 3.

3 M. Foucault, Michel (2001), “La philosophie analytique de la politique”, in *Dits et Écrits II, 1976–88*, eds. D. Defert, F. Ewald, and J. Lagrange, Paris: Gallimard, p. 541.

relations “in terms of existence”,⁴ namely as games marked by specific tactics and strategies, rules and accidents, stakes and objectives.

Far from being concerned with the justification of our principles of justice like analytic political philosophy, therefore, Foucault’s analytic philosophy of politics clearly has a “realist spirit”:⁵ its ultimate function is to make visible the differentiated and concrete mechanisms of power constituting those apparently natural and familiar limits of the present we take for granted. However, the role of an analytico-political philosophy is not a purely descriptive and intellectual one. Rather, rendering visible how power actually works enables at the same time to “intensify the struggles that develop around power, the strategies of the antagonists within relations of power, the tactics employed, the *foyers* of resistance”.⁶

As it promotes a new picture of power, Foucault’s analytic philosophy of politics also entails a redefinition of the very notion of resistance. Indeed, if power can no longer be conceived as a top-down, uniform, and general form of domination stemming from a central point, then one should call into question the traditional, exclusive portrait of resistance as a revolutionary uprising aimed at a total liberation from power. For Foucault, this does not mean that one should turn towards reformism. Conversely, alongside revolutionary acts of liberation from states of domination, Foucault emphasises the existence of particular and diffused practices of resistance characterized by both a local point of emergence and a “transversal” dissemination across countries as well as political and economic regimes. Being irreducible to the structure of revolution, such practices are “anarchistic” struggles, whose immediate aim is to destabilize the “intolerable” games of power that develop around the different issues constituting the very “texture of our everyday life”, like madness, delinquency, illness, prison, sexuality, etc.⁷ Despite their diversity, however, all these practices of freedom have a common target, i.e. the individualising mechanisms of subjection resulting from the secular transposition of the Christian techniques of pastoral power into the modern state. As Foucault claims in 1982, in fact, “the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, [...] but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization linked to the state”,⁸ a problem that still haunts us in these critical times.

4 Ibid., p. 540.

5 D. Lorenzini (2015), *Éthique e politique de soi. Foucault, Hadot, Cavell et les techniques de l'ordinaire*, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, pp. 23–6.

6 Foucault, “La philosophie analytique de la politique”, p. 540.

7 Ibid., pp. 542–45.

8 Foucault, Michel (2000), “The Subject and Power”, in *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume 3: Power*, ed. J. D. Faubion, trans. R. Hurley *et al.*, New York: New Press, p. 336.

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