

## Redrawing Foucault's Social Ontology\*

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### **Abstract.**

I propose that Foucault's works, since he wrote *Discipline and Punish*, rely on an implicit meta-theory that is compatible with the fundamentals of Critical Realism. To this end I examine the status of truth, methodology and social ontology used by Foucault. If this thesis is correct, then a critical realist reading of Michel Foucault would avoid some of the pitfalls that have been attributed to his works - such as constructivism, determinism, localism, and reductionism. Moreover, this understanding of Foucault's works would also offer novel and challenging perspectives for researchers adopting a Foucauldian and/or critical realist study of organizations.

**Key words.** ; Bhaskar; critical realism; epistemology; Foucault; knowledge; methodology; ontology; post-structuralism; power; social reality.

There appears to be much controversy in the field of organization studies over the works of Michel Foucault. On the one hand, authors as Burrell (1988), Jacques (1995), Knights (1990), Knights and Vurdubakis (in Jermier, Knights et al. 1994), Knights and Willmott (1989), Mc Kinlay and Taylor (1996), Townley (1994) have identified in Foucault's works promising perspectives for casting a fresh gaze on contemporary organizations. On the other, authors such as Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) , Findlay and Newton (1998), Reed (1998; 2000), Rowlinson and Carter (2002) issue alarming warnings and severely criticise such "Foucauldian" perspectives. For instance, Reed (2000) structured his critique of Foucauldian discourse analysis<sup>1</sup> around

'... five interrelated themes: constructivism, nominalism, determinism, localism, and reductionism. Each of these in [his] view, identifies major limitations and weaknesses of the Foucauldian approach to analysing organizational discourse.' (Reed 2000: 524, text modified).

My thesis is however that Michel Foucault's works, since 'The Discourse on Language' and Discipline and Punish, rely on a consistent social ontology to a large extent congruent with critical realism. The latter entails an ontological framework that was initially developed by Bhaskar (1975; 1998) and that has flourished in various disciplines such as economics (Lawson 1997), sociology (Archer 1995), and Management studies: Ackroyd and Fleetwood (2000), Fleetwood (2005), Fleetwood and Ackroyd (2004), Sayer (2000).

By showing that Foucault relies (albeit implicitly) on a critical realist social ontology, I attempt to show that even if criticisms such as those formulated by Reed (Cf supra) apply to many "Foucauldian" students of organizations they do not apply to the later works of Foucault. Moreover, I am not the

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<sup>1</sup> The expression "Foucauldian discourse analysts" refers not to Foucault but to writers claiming to be his followers. (Reed, personal communication)

only student of Foucault who advocates a realist reading of his works. Marsden, for instance, defended the possibility of a critical realist reading of Foucault that would be "...stimulated by several points of resemblance between Foucault and realism which suggest a *prima facie* case for their compatibility.' (Marsden 1999: pp. 181-2)

My purpose is to move one step beyond the *prima facie* recognition of points of resemblance between Foucault and critical realism. Thus, I attempt to highlight firm points of anchorage between Foucault's later works and critical realist meta-theory - that is its ontology, epistemology and methodology. However, since Foucault's ontology is implicit, not explicit, my demonstration is necessarily based on a limited set of elements in his work that appear, nonetheless, to be central and recurrent in his later writings after the shift from archaeology to genealogy he initiated in his 'Discourse on Language' (Foucault 1970). These later writings include notably 'Discipline and Punish' (Foucault 1977), 'The History of sexuality' (Foucault 1978), 'The Subject and Power' (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982) as well as some interviews Foucault (1979), Foucault and Gordon (1980), Foucault and Rabinow (Foucault and Rabinow). They exclude, however, 'The Order of Things' (Foucault 1971), 'The Archaeology of Knowledge' (Foucault 1972), 'The Birth of the Clinic' (Foucault 1973) and 'Madness and Civilisation' (Foucault 1965). Furthermore, I aim to open a discussion, not to close it. Therefore I do not expect all my readers to agree with every claim I make but would be very content if this paper provides some material for further dialogue between post structuralist and critical realist researchers.

### **1. What is specific about critical realist meta-theory?**

Preliminary to any further investigation of Foucault's work, I attempt to summarize the features that are necessary for any theory to be compatible with a critical realist meta-theory. If I am right, these features may be (reasonably well) expressed under the form of a number of points that fall into three larger categories: a) the status of truth and error, b) the social ontology and epistemology of social science and, finally, c) finally, the methodological principles for social scientific practice.

### ***a. The status of truth and error***

CR distinguishes between the 'transitive' and the 'intransitive' dimensions of knowledge. The transitive dimension refers to the field of references and comprises such objects as: Discourses, concepts, beliefs, impressions and so on. On the other hand, the intransitive dimension of knowledge refers to the world to which transitive objects refer. It comprises such objects as rocks, birds, people, social relations, beliefs, concepts and so on. Notably, the intransitive dimension includes the transitive dimension but is not limited to it. For instance, the word "rock" belongs to both transitive and intransitive dimensions whereas rocks themselves only belong to the intransitive dimension. CR suggests that the transitive dimension is socially constructed and therefore open to ambiguity and error. CR defends nonetheless a conception of truth as depending on the adequacy between the meaning of the reference formulated in the transitive dimension and the nature of its referent in the intransitive dimension. Thus, CR is realist concerning both transitive and intransitive dimensions, relativist concerning the transitive dimension alone, and (judgementally) rationalist<sup>2</sup> concerning the relation between transitive and intransitive dimensions.

### ***b. The critical realist social ontology and epistemology***

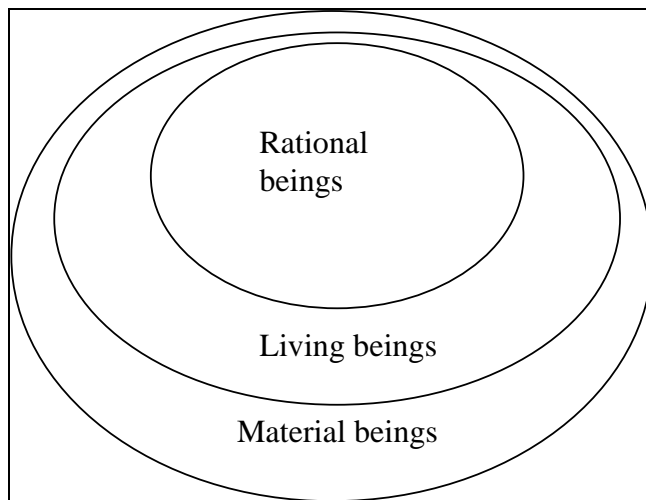
According to CR authors, the fact that natural science necessitates experimentation suggests that the world is not only composed of events and experiences but that it is also composed of (metaphorically) deep mechanisms. It is not usually possible for a single theory to encompass all the mechanisms present in the world as it is composed of multiple strata

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<sup>2</sup> NB: CR authors traditionally use the term 'judgemental rationality' instead of 'rationalism'. This is because the process of judging and choosing between various competing theories necessarily happens within a community and depends to some extent on its norms and practices.

not reducible to each other. Hence, critical realism defends an ontology of stratification and emergence (Cf figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1: The Stratification of Kinds of Being**  
(Source: Collier 1994: 108)



Bhaskar presents the ontological differences between social strata and the more basic ones on which they are grounded by stating that:

- ‘1. Social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities they govern.
2. Social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of agents’ conceptions of what they are doing in their activity.
3. Social structures, unlike natural structures, may be only relatively enduring (so that the tendencies they ground may not be universal in the sense of space-time invariant).<sup>3</sup> (Bhaskar 1998: 38)

In order to account for both individual freedom and social structure, Bhaskar claims that they constitute two distinct strata that are however inseparable since they reproduce and/or transform each other. Hence the

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that, as Lawson Lawson, T. (1997). Economics and reality. London ; New York, Routledge. rightly remarks, the invariability of natural mechanisms might well be incorrect. This does not refute however the fact that social mechanisms are time-space dependent.

need for a system of mediating concepts: positions and practices. It follows that society, which is constituted by the relation between individuals' or groups' relations must be understood as the relatively enduring (but continuously transforming) network of positions-practices.

### ***c. Methodological principles for a critical realist social science***

Since, for the critical realist, the social world is composed of intricately related mechanisms, it follows that social science must abandon the deductive method and cannot rely on experiments. Rather, it must explain events by retrodicting to known mechanisms and it must seek for (yet unknown) mechanisms by retrodution, not deduction or induction. In addition to this methodological imperative, Bhaskar makes two proposals to counter-balance the impossibility of constant conjunctions of events and, thereby, closed systems. First, situations of crisis or transition might be illuminating since there might be fewer mechanisms actualised than in normal situations. Second, the existent (proto)theories held by agents about the specificities of their social settings can provide the social scientist with a starting point. Although this has to be a rectifiable starting point since science can be counter phenomenal<sup>4</sup>.

## **2. Reconstructing Foucault's meta-theory**

I would like now to analyse the congruity of Foucault's works with the meta-theory of critical realism. In a perfect world, I would have presented the section on Foucault's social ontology (that is, on his transformational model of social activity) prior to the methodological sections on his use of

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<sup>4</sup> Both compensator and analogue were subject to discussion amongst critical realist authors. See for example Collier Grey, C. (1994). "Career as a Project of the Self and Labour Process Discipline." *Sociology* 28(2): 479. and Lawson Lawson, T. (1997). *Economics and reality*. London ; New York, Routledge.

scientific knowledge and on the relevance of his field of investigation. I have chosen however to start with the two latter sections because they clarify two possible misunderstandings about Foucault. The first one is his so-called (judgemental) relativism, while the second is the range of his conclusions, which have arguably been misunderstood by many theorists.

### ***a. Revisiting the status of truth and error in Foucault's works***

The question is the following: Is Foucault considering that truth is a mere social product, since he affirms that knowledge and power are intimately linked and that knowledge produces “ truths ” to which we submit?

‘We should admit rather that *power produces knowledge* (and not simply because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.... In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the process of struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge.’ (Foucault 1977: pp. 27-8)

Does Foucault consider truth to be entirely a matter of convention, or agreement? Does he consider truth to be unconnected to the intransitive realm? In short, does he consider truth to be **merely** a social construct – where the term “merely” implies that there is no connection between a truth claim made within a community and some intransitive entity? After all he does suggest that knowledge and power are intimately linked and that knowledge produces regimes of truth. If this means that science is unconnected with the intransitive realm; that any claim to truth is always-already doomed by the impurity of a scientific activity which maintains secret and mysterious relations with power, then two disastrous consequences follow in the interpretation of Foucault. Firstly, his claim is that if the object of scientific inquiry can be reduced to (or explained away by) the social mechanisms which govern science, then Foucault very

clearly commits the “epistemic fallacy” and denies that the truth of scientific discourse is subordinated to the reality of its object of investigation. In this case, the attempt at grounding Foucault in a critical realist framework should stop here and my argument is flawed. Secondly, by assuming this position, Foucault would undermine his own theses as he would be committing a performative contradiction (Habermas) - that is a contradiction held not between two contradictory explicit statements but between one explicit statement and an implicit, albeit necessary, statement implied by the very performance of the speech act (e.g. “I did not write these lines”). In effect, if knowledge is only determined by social constraints, then Foucault’s own opus is necessarily a mere social product. In this case, his arguments would not have more value than any other contradictory arguments. At best, his work would present an interest as (poor) poesy. If it is the case that Foucault maintains that truth is only socially determined, then he must admit in turn that his own work entirely constructs the reality to which it pretends to refer.

It is crucial, therefore, to show how Foucault can affirm at the same time that power and knowledge are socially and historically inseparable<sup>5</sup> and that science can lead to true knowledge that depends on its object of investigation. The answer, I think, lies in the subordination of archaeology to genealogy. In Foucault’s later works (*Discipline and Punish, The History of Sexuality*), the point of analysing discourse is no longer to retrace the sovereign unity of thought that can be found at a given period. Rather, Foucault is interested in science because it is a social practice. To what

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<sup>5</sup> Contrary to a criticism formulated in Archer, M. S. (1988). Culture and agency: The place of culture in social theory. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York, Cambridge University Press. and reiterated *mot pour mot* in Archer, M. S. (1995). Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press., it may be worth stressing that historical inseparability does not imply necessarily ontological or analytical inseparability. Thus, Foucault’s ‘power-knowledge’ is understood here more as a ‘specific form of amalgamation’ than as an amalgam enjoying a form of ontological unity.



extent can the consideration of science as a social practice avoid the two pitfalls mentioned above?

First, let us note that Bhaskar readily admits that knowledge is not only determined by its intransitive objects but also by social mechanisms. Knowledge, then, is a social phenomenon and Bhaskar's point is that it is erroneous to conclude from the very social nature of knowledge that it **constructs** alone the object to which it actually **refers** (Bhaskar 1975: p. 195). I would like to illustrate a similar point about Foucault by analysing his study of scientific activity. When he studies the process of (let us say for clarity) medicine, the nature of the objects of enquiry are quite different: The medical scientist studies the body as the locus of disease whereas Foucault studies the activities of the medical scientist and is therefore interested in the **body as an object for scientific investigation**. If we keep to the distinction between transitive and intransitive dimensions, we could say that the intransitive objects of the medical scientist comprise such things as bodies and the natural mechanisms that help explain their (dys)functioning. However, the intransitive objects of Foucault would comprise such things as the activities of the medical scientist, the discourses she re/produces, the network of relations in which she acts (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 6). Moreover, the transitive dimension of the medical scientist comprises the medical discourse on biological mechanisms, health, illness and so on. It is different from Foucault's transitive dimension that comprises his own theories about medical scientist activities but not those of the medical scientist he studies. (Cf figure 2.2).

**Figure 2.2: Foucault's intransitive dimension**

	Transitive dimension	Intransitive dimension
Medical scientist	<p><b>Theory of medical scientist on body and illness</b></p>	<p><b>Body and illness</b></p>
Foucault	<p><b>Theory of Foucault on medical scientist's activities and theories</b></p>	<p><b>Activities and theories of medical scientist</b></p>

Foucault's object of investigation is two-fold. First, he studies the relation of the scientific practice to its object: how is the (intransitive) object investigated as a scientific (transitive) one? What means does the scientist use for her enquiry? What are the main issues facing her or, in other words, what are the "problématiques" with which she is confronted? It appears that the relation of scientific practice to its object is not only determined by the nature of the investigated object or by the scientific progress made. For example the absence of dissections in Europe until the 16<sup>th</sup> century cannot be explained in terms of the state of scientific knowledge, but rather in terms of social constraints (law, religion, beliefs, morality, etc.) Hence, the second question Foucault poses is then: what social mechanisms enabled (and encouraged) the study of this aspect of reality rather than that other one? And what were in turn the social consequences? For example, what new social mechanisms made "possible and necessary the appearance of houses of confinement"? What, in turn, were the repercussions of these houses of confinement on society? It follows from the intransitive dimension Foucault studies that the very validity of the sciences under scrutiny is voluntarily left unquestioned. Whether the practice of a particular science is epistemically grounded and

whether the knowledge it generates is adequate are not relevant since both false and true beliefs have social consequences and are socially enabled. Therefore, the existence of an intransitive dimension for science is maintained though not studied and Foucault's study of science is not doomed to relativism.

Moreover, the very knowledge generated by Foucault has itself a well-defined intransitive dimension: that of the relationship between power relations and scientific practice. Since "dubious" science can have as much social consequence as legitimate science, and since the social consequences are not necessarily good or liberating ones<sup>6</sup>, it follows that, though not a relativist (about the intransitive dimension), Foucault is also not "scientistic" in the sense of having an unquestioned optimism about science:

'There is nothing "scientistic" in this (that is, a dogmatic belief in the value of scientific knowledge), but neither is it a sceptical or relativistic refusal of all verified truth. What is questioned is the way in which knowledge circulates and functions, its relations to power. In short the *régime du savoir*.' (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 212)

Finally, although Foucault cites many legitimate sciences, he nonetheless focuses his attention on the most "dubious ones": e.g. clinical medicine, psychiatry and criminology (Foucault and Rabinow 1986). I believe there is a reason for this. Since Foucault is interested in the social aspect of science it can be envisaged that this social aspect will appear with more clarity for "dubious" sciences.

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<sup>6</sup> Is it necessary to remind that Auschwitz, as a machine for extermination, for purification and for the constitution of knowledge would have never been possible without numerous "perfectly legitimate" sciences? Needless to say, science alone does not explain how Auschwitz came to happen.

### ***b. Foucault's methodology: studying an open social world***

In this section, I contend that the methodology of Foucault's project is highly consistent with the critical realist methodological premises for the study of society as an open system without possible closure. Accordingly I will tackle the issues of Foucault's fields of investigation, as well as the way he uses history.

One of the things Foucault is often reproached for is that, by studying prisons and asylums, he blinded himself to many other forms of power relations and, hence, incorrectly deduced a carceral vision of society. Anthony Giddens appears to have reproached Foucault on similar grounds since as one author critically puts it:

'[Giddens] approval of Foucault's work is conditional. It is not taken as a contribution to the project of a general social theory, but to a subclass of social theory - the theory of administrative power. It is taken, then, to be a theory of the third rank, operating not at the primary level of foundational clarification of a philosophical kind, nor at the secondary level of a general social theory, but below and subordinate to both of these superior levels.' (Boyne 1990: 59, text modified)

Giddens' comments (and any others similar to his) imply that a mechanism isolated in a certain field would not exist outside of it or, in other words, that society is a juxtaposition of isolated systems. In my view, this entails a serious misunderstanding of the motives of Foucault's study of asylums and prisons. Needless to say, Michel Foucault is not Jean Genet and contrary to the French poet and novelist he does not love prison for its own sake. If we look at the reasons why Foucault has been interested in carceral power it appears that his objective is to obtain knowledge about society, not about the prison or the asylum. Thus Foucault makes it clear that he studies prisons "as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used" (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 211). Therefore if Foucault focuses on prisons it is precisely because he wanted to isolate a transphenomenal mechanism (that is, disciplinary power) that is actualised but less visible in other organizational settings such as factories and court-

houses. In short, by focusing on prisons, Foucault not only admits the openness of the social world, but he also presupposes it and adapts his methods of investigation to it.

It can also be asked why Foucault bothered himself with the burden of historical accounts, sometimes over periods going back to the middle ages while he was concerned with present social mechanisms. The answer is, I think, to be found in Foucault's genealogical use of history. It is important to distinguish what Foucault means by "genealogy", since the word can be doubly misleading. Let us first note that Foucault's use of genealogy avoids the so-called "genealogical fallacy" which consists in reducing (explaining away) a current state by referring to a former one. This way of proceeding is incompatible with both critical realism (since it denies the possibility of stratification and emergence) and with Foucault (since it would assume a continuous and homogeneous development of history). The second misinterpretation would be to identify Foucault's "genealogy" with Nietzsche's "genealogy". However, I understand Foucault's denomination of his historical practice as homage: Foucault has borrowed the word from Nietzsche but has not, however, borrowed its exact content.

'Whereas Nietzsche often seems to ground morality and social institutions in the tactics of individual actors, Foucault totally depsychologises this approach and sees all psychological motivation not as the source but as the result of strategies without strategists.'

(Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 109)<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Foucault's use of history can be better understood by referring to his statement that

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<sup>7</sup> Dreyfus and Rabinow's claim about all psychological motivations may be slightly excessive. Foucault's point is rather that: 'the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them' Foucault, M. (1978). The history of sexuality. New York, Pantheon. Compare with Bhaskar's statement that: 'purposefulness, intentionality and sometimes self-consciousness characterize human actions but not transformations in the social structure' Bhaskar, R. (1998). The possibility of naturalism: A philosophical critique of the contemporary human sciences. London ; New York, Routledge.

'[he] would like to write the history of the prison, with all the political investment on the body it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because [he is] interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present.' (Foucault 1977: 31, text modified)

By affirming that he tries to write a history of the present Foucault detaches himself from two ways of writing history. He aims neither to give a “totalising” picture of the past, nor does he try to write a history of the past by referring to present meanings (and thus ignoring the shifting nature of social mechanisms). Instead, what Foucault aims at doing is to begin with a (rough) diagnosis of the current situation. In the *The History of Sexuality vol.1*, for example, he diagnoses the importance of the mechanism of confession. He then isolates the particular components of this relation of power<sup>8</sup>. These components form an apparatus, a “grid of intelligibility” or system of relations that can be established between (ontologically heterogeneous) elements such as

'Discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions - in short, the said as much as the unsaid.' (Foucault and Gordon 1980: 194)

However, whereas archaeology is preoccupied with the reconstitution of the apparatus, genealogy is interested in taking each of its components literally, and following the web of social relations which supports them (and which they support and modify). Hence the objective of Foucault's genealogy is to study the **effects** of the elements of the apparatus and not their meaning. Finally, Foucault follows through history initially isolated components of the apparatus and then studies their current convergence. In this light, it might be easier to understand why Foucault's analyses were deemed to lack (traditional chronological) narrative (Rowlinson and Carter 2002: 532). What should, in fact, be noted about Foucault's discourse is

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<sup>8</sup> A critical realist could argue that relations of power are social mechanisms to the extent that they make a difference to the field of possible actions between two persons.

less the absence of a narrative than the presence of a diachronic form of narration that follows the chronology not of a group or a society as a whole, but rather of a particular mechanism or a particular aspect of society. For example, when Foucault studies the mechanism of confession as an important ritual of power in which a specific technology of the body was forged through an imperative of verbalising one's sex life,

'[he] is not giving us a history of the seventeenth century. He is not claiming even that this imperative was of the greatest import then. Instead he is isolating the central components of political technology today and tracing them back in time. Foucault writes the history of the confession in the seventeenth century for the purposes of writing "a history of the present".' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 119)

It could be argued that Foucault's avoidance of both presentism and classic "totalising history" is adapted to the fact that society is an open system and that it is composed of relatively enduring social structures. Foucault's histories of the present seek the multiple mechanisms that converged at a particular time to form a complex and (at first sight) obscure mechanism. Let us retrace the main steps of his approach. First, he often starts from a commonly held view (e.g. that prisons appeared because of the need of the Bourgeoisie for a cheap workforce) and seeks to move beyond them. In doing this, his approach is close to the "analogue" defended by Bhaskar. The aim of his study, however, is precisely to go beyond common views. He shows, for example, in *Discipline and Punish* that the commonly held view is wrong, since prisoners always performed useless tasks and suggests (Foucault and Gordon 1980: 40) that prisons were maintained because they were useful for policy makers in ways that long escaped the analyses of observers from the academic world: prisons create delinquents who help the police in its activity of surveillance and they drive the attention away from the "illegalities" committed by members of the higher strata of society. Hence he considers that social mechanisms can be counter-phenomenal. But then, how does Foucault explain the existence, perpetuation and transformation of social mechanisms without recurring to functionalist accounts that would explain them wholly in terms of their social functions? To these issues we now turn.

***c. Foucault's social ontology: a stratified and transformational conception of social reality***

The detractors of Foucauldian analysis often accuse it of being incapable of distinguishing ontologically and analytically between human agency and social constraint. As Reed puts it

'By denying any ontological and/or analytical differentiation between creative agency and structural constraint, Foucauldian discourse analysis ends up with an explanatory logic which is unable to distinguish between 'open doors' and 'brick walls' (Reed 1998: 209)

Arguably, distinguishing between freedom and constraint should not mean that, on the one hand, it is possible to find actions which are purely free, liberated from any form of constraint, while, on the other there can exist purely structural constraints in which human freedom is deleted. Even recognising that most actions present the characteristics of both is not enough to make the argument credible. Structural constraint is necessarily enabled by agents' actions. Conversely, these actions, if they are to have any shape or any meaning, must be limited by a form of constraint. Neither the dead body nor the mad man dancing are examples of structural constraint or of human agency. Moreover, if structure is characterised by constraint, and agency by freedom, then we assume a model of Social Reality presenting the same inconsistencies as the one developed by Berger and Luckmann<sup>9</sup> (1967). On the contrary, the critical realist social ontology assumes that: action presupposes both structure and agency; structure enables and constrains; and action reproduces and transforms structure.

I would now like to show that Foucault works with an (implicit) ontology that shares the crucial characteristics of the critical realist ontology as it assumes a relational conception of society and considers structures as

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<sup>9</sup> For a critique of the Berger & Luckmann model, see Bhaskar Bhaskar, R. (1998).

The possibility of naturalism: A philosophical critique of the contemporary human sciences. London ; New York, Routledge.



both enabling and constraining for agency. Moreover, I argue that Foucault's ontology is stratified as it differentiates between biological, individual and social realms. There is, however, a difficulty concerning the fact that Foucault uses a vocabulary that is different from critical realist vocabulary. Thus, our excavation of the ontological presuppositions of Foucault must be augmented by a work of translation of the elements that may be interpreted as sharing identical referents but different references in each framework. For instance Foucault does not use the words structure and agency but refers to "the political" or "strategies" (processes located at the level of social relations that may not be attributed to any specific people) and to "tactics" (processes consciously initiated by people). He does not consider power as a (rare) substance to be seized but rather as a relation between people in which one person's actions modifies the range of actions of another person. Hence, any social relation between persons entails power relations and any power relation supposes a social relation.

'What therefore would be proper to a relationship of power is that it be a mode of action upon actions. That is to say, power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted "above" society as a supplementary structure whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of. In any case, to live in society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible - and in fact ongoing. A society without power relations can only be an abstraction.' (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: pp. 222-3)

By studying society through power, Foucault is therefore adopting a relational conception of society. Moreover, he does not consider power as mere restriction as do the authors who write about structural constraint without mentioning as a corollary that it enables action. Rather his point is that power has both a negative and a positive role, that it constrains as well as it enables. Hence, power relations not only prohibit actions or limit the field of possible actions, they also enable fields of action and permit the constitution of knowledge. However taking as a given that power is at the same time restrictive (negative) and enabling (positive), to what extent do power relations sustain/rely on social reality? Foucault's point about this is that: "people know what they do, they sometime know why they do it, but what they don't know is what they do does." (Foucault, personal

communication with Dreyfus and Rabinow, cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 187). This amounts to saying that the use of power leads to deliberate tactics (of which the person may or may not be aware), but at the same time it leads also to unintended strategies of power. Hence,

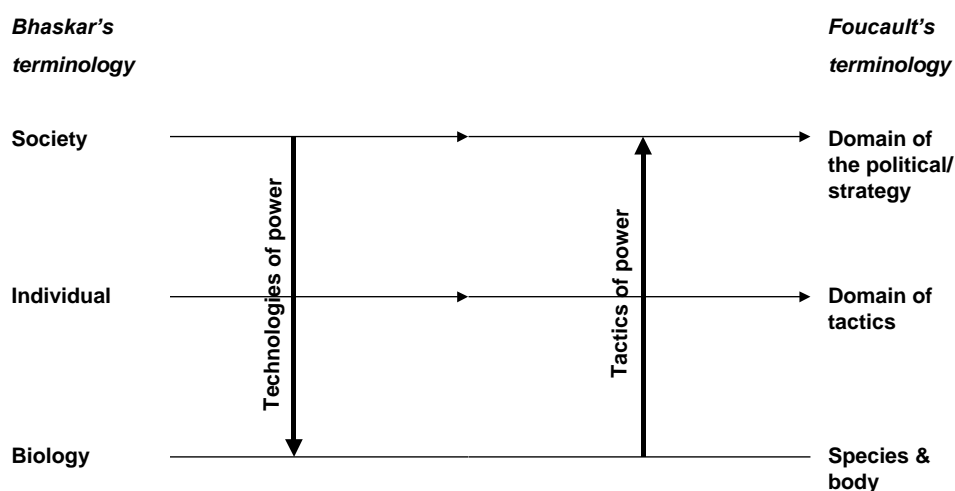
'The rationality of power is characterised by tactics which are often quite explicit at the restricted level where they are inscribed (the local cynicism of power), tactics which, becoming connected to one another, attracting and propagating one another, but finding their base of support and their condition elsewhere, end by forming comprehensive systems: the logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them: an implicit characteristic of the great anonymous, almost unspoken strategies which coordinate the loquacious tactics whose "inventors" or decision makers are often without hypocrisy' (Foucault 1978: 95)

Two conclusions can be drawn from Foucault's conception of power. Firstly, by distinguishing between strategies and tactics, Foucault is clearly working with a stratified and differentiated social reality in which the mechanisms governing strategies (relative to social relations) are not the same as those governing tactics (relative to people). Secondly, we can recognise here crucial elements of Bhaskar's ontology: Thus, not only does Foucault have a relational conception of society but also he recognises that people's actions and social relations exist in virtue of two groups of mechanisms that are ontologically distinct.

In addition to the strata of tactics/individuals and strategies/society, Foucault also takes account of the more basic stratum of biology. This is particularly noticeable in his use of "biopower" as an instance of power preoccupied with the government of humans to the extent that they constitute a biological species. Hence, according to him, one cannot understand modern society without studying the web of power-knowledge relations that traverses it from the strata of strategies to the very biological strata of human beings as a population (Foucault 1978: 143). Furthermore, strategies and tactics (Foucault's designation) have the same influences on people's practice as the strata of individuals and society (Bhaskar's designation): strategies both limit and enable tactics, while tactics both

reproduce (sustain) and produce (modify) existing strategies. Foucault refers to the influence of strategies over tactics as “technologies of power”, while he refers to the influence of tactics on strategies as “tactics of power” (Cf figure 2.3)

**Figure 2.3: Foucault’s model of stratification of social reality**

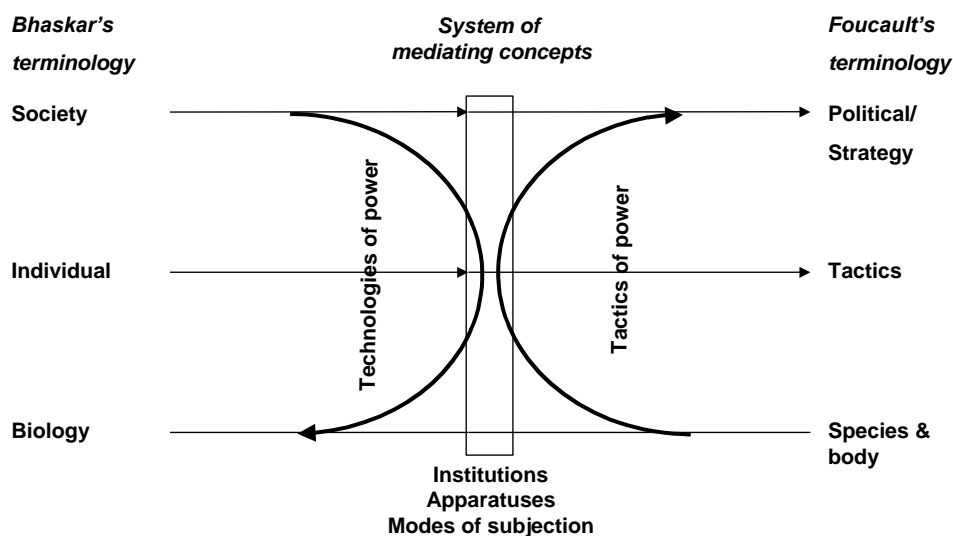


If my reading of Foucault is accepted, then it should undermine one of the major criticisms formulated by Archer against Foucault, i.e. that “the later work [of Foucault] endorses the arbitrariness of socio-cultural interaction because no account is given of why, when or how people do struggle.” (Archer 1988: xviii). I agree with Archer that Foucault does not dedicate as much space to examining processes of struggle as he dedicates to processes of domination. However in Foucault’s study, struggle is neither unthinkable nor completely omitted. For instance, the chapter “Illegalities and delinquency” in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977: 257-92) is full of examples of such struggles occurring in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These include: A young delinquent replying to the judge by formulating the illegalities he had accomplished as freedom rather than as offence; workers’ newspapers writing “counter fait-divers” to oppose the vision of delinquents mediated by bourgeois “fait divers”; judges and lawyers attempting (unsuccessfully) to

break the “police-prison-delinquency” structure; the chained prisoners resorting to songs to praise their own crimes; and so on. The crucial point to be grasped however is that, in a given field, tactics of resistance and tactics of domination need to resort to various technologies of power that are defined by a common strategy.

I hope that my interpretation of Foucault’s stratification of reality is now clearer and the different strata of his ontology have been identified. The question, however, of how Foucault manages to link structure and agency is not yet evident. My point is that, although Foucault did not pose the problem of the links between strata in the same terms as Bhaskar, it is nonetheless possible to locate in his work similar concepts that constitute a point of contact between human agency and social structures. I will argue that these concepts both endure and are immediately occupied by individuals. However, the fact that they are immediately occupied by the individual does not mean that they appear immediately in sovereign clarity in front of the analyst. Rather, as they have to be individuated relationally, a great deal of work must be undertaken to disentangle the networks they constitute. For Foucault, institutions; apparatuses and, finally, subjects are examples of such mediating concepts. (Cf figure 2.4)

**Figure 2.4: Foucault’s transformational model of social activity**



Foucault affirms that it is perfectly legitimate to study power through “carefully defined” institutions, but that this is not sufficient to grasp all the range of relevant power relations. Nonetheless, institutions provide the analyst with a useful (though approximate) range of ‘slots’ occupied by the individual in the more general structure of power. In institutions, the positions (places, rules, functions, tasks, duties, rights, etc.) and practices that individuals occupy appear easily. However institutions alone might mislead the observer since she runs the risk of interpreting all the relations of power by referring exclusively to the particularity of the institution. Hence, in order to study institutions, Foucault uses another, deeper, mediating concept, that of apparatuses. The apparatus has a double role for Foucault. First, it is a “grid of analysis” for his historical investigation and second, it refers to a range of heterogeneous elements at play (CF *supra*). These elements have two particularities. The first one is that they act directly on the individual’s actions (and sometimes on her body), the second one is that they are invested by the “deep” mechanism of power Foucault the genealogist is seeking to excavate. Hence, they constitute privileged links between the biological, the tactical and the strategic strata. Finally I would put among Foucault’s mediating concepts the very **mode of subjectification** of the individual. For Foucault, the word subject has clearly two complementary meanings:

‘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 in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 212)

Unfortunately, I do not have enough space to define with precision the status of the subject in Foucault’s work and to show to what extent ‘in his later work [...] he began to reinstate a more robust self concept, one strong enough to restore the “problem of structure and agency” which the notion of resistance ineluctably implies.’ (Archer 2000: 19-20). I would like, however, to highlight an interesting difference between Foucault and

Bhaskar. Although both authors share a common ontology and respect similar epistemological principles, they do not direct social investigation in exactly the same way. For Bhaskar, it seems that the system of mediating concepts is considered as a tool for further investigation of the social strata. For Foucault, although the investigation of social strata begins with the mediating concepts of institutions and is pursued with that of apparatuses, the aim of his studies is oriented in direction of a third type of mediating concept, that of the individual as subject. However, if both frameworks share the same ontology and epistemology it is arguable that, not only are both types of investigation compatible, but that they may also support each other. In this case, Foucauldians would use social mechanisms to investigate mediating concepts, while Bhaskarians would investigate social mechanisms with mediating concepts refined by Foucauldians.

### **3. Consequences for critical realist critiques of Foucault**

Even if the interpretation of Foucault I propose is accepted, the consequence cannot be that critical realists should accept every substantial claim made by Foucault. For instance, CR authors need not share Foucault's views on the development of disciplinary power in modern times or on the problematization of sexuality as a central object of knowledge. Thus, authors disagreeing with Foucault could attempt to show either that Foucault's historical accounts of the genealogy of disciplinary power are inaccurate, that he did not bother to recast disciplinary power in perspective and omitted important non-disciplinary species of contemporary power, that he failed to distinguish between legitimate and non-legitimate power (or, better, to characterise precisely the legitimacy of the powers he analysed) and so on. The point is however that if they are to disagree with Foucault, their disagreement ought to be located at the level of his theories, not his meta-theory. This leads us to refute the criticisms formulated by Reed (2000) insofar as Foucault is concerned (but not necessarily some his followers). Is Foucault a constructivist in the sense that 'there is nothing outside discourse but more discourse' (Reed 2000: 525) or is he determinist to the extent that 'the functioning of discourse is

treated as largely autonomous and independent of human agency'? (*Ibid*) As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982) convincingly argue, this may well have been the case at the time of writing the 'Order of Things' and the 'Archaeology of Knowledge' but not after Foucault's genealogical turn and his study of apparatus (CF *supra*). Similarly I hope that by clarifying how tactics of power are constrained and enabled by overall strategies of power I have provided some ground to refute charges of localism (incapacity to deal with institutionalised stabilities and continuities in power relations) and reductionism (blindness to the wider socio-political context). We are still left, however, with the question of whether Foucault is prone to nominalism, understood as: 'any form of interpretation or explanation is necessarily relative to and constrained by the discursive framework and context in which it originates and becomes reproduced as knowledge' (Reed 2000) Arguably Foucault is a nominalist in this sense of the term. It could perhaps be argued, however, that critical realism can be congruent with nominalism defined in these terms, especially if one wants to avoid the ontic fallacy (Bhaskar 1975) consisting in ignoring the social processes through which knowledge is constituted. Thus, Foucault may not escape the charge of nominalism but he may escape the problems commonly associated with it!

#### **4. Consequences for further Foucauldian study: an illustration**

I would now like to provide a brief illustration of the contribution that a critical realist reading of Foucault could make to Foucauldian students of organization. To this end, I consider the Foucauldian study conducted by Grey (1994). Grey's study is exemplary in both senses of the term. On the one hand it is insightful and rigorously conducted, on the other it is widely cited and is illustrative of the way Foucauldians have treated such themes as power and identity. Grey's argument is that 'career' constitutes a crucial "project of the self" for most professionals working in large chartered accountancy firms. He also goes further and shows that it

"transforms the nature and meaning of [significant] exercises of disciplinary power... For, again and again, the techniques of

disciplinary power become construed as benevolent aids to career development.” (Grey 1994: 494, text modified)

A critical realist reading of Foucault does not necessarily contradict the substance of the theses defended in Grey’s paper. However, it could help theorise more precisely the causal relation between career as a project of the self and the emergence of a form of power regarded as “benevolent” by social participants. Indeed, Grey throws some light on the issues of what career is and how it is effective in sustaining this form of “benevolent” power. However, a critical realist would object that Grey’s analysis draws a “flat” picture of the apparatus of “benevolent power” and does not locate its various processes at different levels of ontological depth. In the following paragraphs, I rely on my past experience as a professional in order to explore how a (metaphorically) “deeper” picture could be drawn. The purpose of this exercise is less to make a substantial contribution to the field of critical accounting than to illustrate how a critical realist reading of Foucault allows us to understand more fully the relation of causality between career and “benevolent” power. Moreover, the kind of knowledge it generates (retroductively) is necessarily open to contestation and refutation. Nonetheless, I hope that such an alternative understanding may be useful for understanding organizational forms and for transforming them. Thus, I also attempt to indicate (very roughly) how the strategy of power at play presents points of weakness at various levels and indicate possible tactics available to agents wishing to struggle against it.

If we enquire through retroduction into the social mechanisms that make possible career as a locus for benevolent power we may come out with a list of more or less stratified structural causes such as:

- (i) the fact that (more often than not) auditors get accustomed to **mystified forms of power relations** in various settings of their previous curriculum: middle class families, university and experiences in graduate programmes. These forms of power relations are mystified as commands and are principally expressed under the form of demand and advice. Arguably, young people from lower-class families who start work immediately after school may not have had the opportunity to



learn much how to interpret the 'soft' signs used by management to give commands. This mystified form of power relations is itself possible because of

- (ii) a **myth of reciprocity and equality** that is fostered in these same social settings and that leads in turn to accountants turning a blind eye on those aspects of discipline that reveal their very subordination as employees. Signs of reluctance as well as overt criticism of the asymmetry of power relations are avoided and have the double effect of making individual interlocutors very uncomfortable and of impeding the usual functioning of this strategy of power. This myth of equality is itself possible because
- (iii) In these settings (middle class family, university, accountancy) the subordinates are in a **social trajectory** offering them a fair chance of attaining in the future a social and economic status comparable to that of their current superordinates. Perhaps, if the professional prospects for (ex) auditors were duller, then much of the appraisal system would seem less benign and the notion of 'career counselling' would make less sense. Moreover, if the prospects of salary increase were not bright then trainees would not be able to produce enthusiasm spontaneously despite the repetitive aspect of most tasks they perform. This social trajectory is itself made possible because of two sets of mechanisms
- (iva) There is an **asymmetry of power between job hunters** that favours those who worked previously in a well-established accountancy firm. Accountants working in large chartered accountancy firm either get promoted or leave the firm to find socially and economically appealing jobs in the industry. This asymmetry is all the more effective for the notion of 'career' that it spreads across a wide range of institutions and countries. For example, an auditor leaving an accountancy firm in Paris could expect to find relatively easily a valued job in a pharmaceutical firm in Boston. However, the existence of the possibility of such trajectory is not enough to explain why professionals chose to

dedicate their efforts to pursuing it. Thus one also needs to understand how it necessitates

- (ivb) **The obligation felt by professionals to maintain their status** vis-à-vis themselves and their community (friends, spouses, families, colleagues, etc.) This obligation has both economic and ethical grounds. It is economic since by abandoning their current (advantageous) social status, professionals would exclude themselves from many costly social activities within their community. It is also ethical to the extent that professionals and their communities view career as an individual responsibility and a sign of flourishing. Thus, failure to develop a 'successful' career is viewed as a direct sign of failure to having 'successfully' lived one's life. To this extent, career can be viewed as a project of the self.

Moreover, it could be possible to elaborate a genealogical account of this stratified strategy of benign and counselling power by retracing diachronically the historical emergence of the various mechanisms that contribute to its reproduction. Finally, it is worth noting that agents may use the elements thus mapped for their own local struggles. For instance, agents wishing to transform the current mystification of power relations could both act by promoting management programmes that insist on the constraining aspects of power and by using the help of ex-employees having experimented the "dark side" of these relations of power, for example at the moment of their breaking down. Moreover, the crucial influence of universities on desire for career may indicate that these can usefully be invested either by agents wishing to reinforce this desire (typically, accountancy firms dedicate much time and money for this purpose) or by agents wishing to counter it (for instance, critical OB supervisors). Also, actions against "benevolent" forms of power could also attempt to undermine the belief that people having undertaken such careers are not necessarily better job candidates than people having worked in the accountancy departments of other kinds of firms. For instance, tactical struggle could perhaps be conducted by putting forward failure stories of ex-accountants who switched to industry and were not

quite prepared for the requirements of their new post. Possible vectors for such actions could be associations of HR managers, professional newspapers or magazines and again, management schools. Finally, these “benevolent” forms of power could also suffer from attacks aimed at the relatively widespread belief that professional career reflects intrinsic personal qualities. For example, such a struggle could take the reverse form of the recurring theme of ‘hidden talents’ that is so often used by large firms for the recruitment of careerist people. Perhaps a persuasive attack could present these talents not as ‘hidden’ but as ‘wasted’ because of the excessive demands of such firms on their employees.

### **Summary and conclusion**

This paper has argued that a Critical Realist interpretation of Foucault is possible. By focusing on the distinction between tactics and strategies in Foucault’s work, I have argued that it presents a stratified conception of social reality similar to Bhaskar’s. I have also argued that Foucault, like Bhaskar, uses a system of mediating concepts linking structure and agency. However, Foucault does not take these concepts for granted and refines them along with his analysis. It has also been argued that Foucault developed an original approach to sociology by undertaking the task of a “history of the present”. This approach takes into consideration the time-space shifts occurring in social structures and permits a counter-phenomenal account of social reality. I argued that Foucault’s most famous insight (that knowledge and power are interdependent and can be studied at once) entails neither a performative contradiction nor a recourse to the “epistemic fallacy”. By distinguishing between Foucault’s transitive and intransitive objects, I have argued that Foucault’s relativism is an epistemic relativism about the transitive dimension but that it does not imply an ontological relativism about the intransitive dimension. Moreover, I have outlined some consequences for researchers in the field of organization studies. Foucault’s works are definitely not out of reach of critical realist authors’ critical appreciations. However in order to discharge their full explanatory power the latter must be levelled at Foucault’s theories rather than at his meta-theory. Similarly, I attempted to illustrate on an exemplary

piece of Foucauldian research (Grey 1994) what could be gained by adopting a critical realist reading of Foucault: Namely, the possibility of elaborating explanations that take into account the ontological stratification of social reality and of identifying strategic *loci* for social transformation.

## Note

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