The discourse of Michel Foucault: A sociological encounter

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A B S T R A C T

Michel Foucault is a major source for the idea in critical accounting and organizational studies that identities (selves, subjectivities) are discursively constituted. This return to the text is intended as a clarification of what Foucault actually says on this matter and an assessment of how far it can be regarded as authoritative. The major conclusions are as follows.

The subject matter of Foucault's 'discursive' phase is not discourse in its generality but islands of organization ('discursive formations') within it. To all intents and purposes these are bodies of knowledge and Foucault's focus is on those which he calls 'human sciences'. His concern is to show that these can be understood as a rule-governed systems of discursive events. The alternative of an action-theoretic account is ruled out by Foucault's declared intention of avoiding recourse to a concept of human agency. Thus Foucault does not theorize discourse as an expression of human subjectivity. Rather he theorizes the subject as an image of the human being which is produced by, and presumed in, self-organizing systems of knowledge.

In Foucault's work up to and including the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, therefore, the discursively constructed subject is not a flesh-and-blood human being at all. It is a thought-object constructed by, and within, the human sciences. Because there are a number of human sciences there are a corresponding number of constituted subjects, each of which, in the first instance, has currency only within its parent knowledge. In Foucault's earlier *Order of Things*, however, a unitary 'contemporary subject' is theorized as a composite of these constructs. Since the constituting discourses are depicted as evolving autonomously, Foucault is thus able to produce a history of 'the different modes by which . . . human beings are made subjects'.

All this means that any support from Foucault for the idea that subjectivities are discursively constituted in actuality must rest on Foucault's genealogical phase. In *Discipline and Punish*, the human sciences are depicted, not as self-organizing fields of knowledge, but as the theoretical arms of various regimes of behavioural correction. Foucault is convincing in his claim that this 'power–knowledge' has diffused outwards from the total institutions in which it was prototyped, thence to become the characteristically modern modality of power. He is much less convincing on the question of its effects. Despite Foucault's talk of 'shaping the soul', in fact, it is not clear that he has anything at all to say about this. The problem is that all of his descriptions of the various disciplinary orders are 'top down' accounts, relying either on the programmes of legal theorists and institutional reformers or on observation of institutional routines by official inspectors. The voice of the inmate is absent entirely, as is any evidence that disciplinary regimes achieve anything more than a calculative conformity to their behavioural dictates.

This is not to deny that disciplinary power *may* impact on subjectivities. The point here is that such an effect needs to be evidenced rather than simply assumed on the basis of (what has been taken to be) Foucault's say-so. In critical accounting, unfortunately, the tendency has been to treat accounting as a discursive system or regime of power–knowledge and then

cite Foucault as if this were sufficient to establish that it works through the production of subjectivities. The paper concludes with a discussion of two recent examples, one of which appeals to a concept of discursive constitution and one to the concept of power–knowledge.

1. Foucault's *Archaeology* as a source-text for the idea of constitutive discourse

'Read More Foucault' (Anthony Hopwood, editor's comment to author circa 1992).

This paper considers the influence of Michel Foucault as it bears on a post-structuralist orthodoxy articulated in the field of organizational studies by Hardy and Phillips (2004: 301):

> Our view of discourse is heavily influenced by the work of Foucault [five citations omitted]. He defines discourses as bodies of knowledge that 'systematically form the objects of which they speak . . . discourses do not simply describe the social world; they constitute it by bringing certain phenomena into being through the way in which they categorize and make sense of an otherwise meaningless reality.

Expressing similar views in critical accounting, Ezzamel et al. (2008: 113) enlist the additional support of 'leading neo-Marxist thinker' Stuart Hall, who

> has commented positively on the Foucaultian concept of discourse, it 'governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. . .Foucault does not deny that things have a real, material existence in the world. What he does argue is that "nothing has any meaning outside of discourse"' (Hall, 1997, p. 45, quoting Foucault, 1972, no page number).

Notice the tendentious wording of this last paragraph. Discourse does not 'govern' the way things are talked about: it is a word which *means* the way things are talked about. As such, it carries no implication of limits on what can be thought and said. It is true that people sometimes express themselves in ready-made formulae, but that could just as well reflect a formulaic tendency in social life – what else is social institution? What seems to be lurking behind the 'muscular' view of discourse expressed above (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011: 1129) is a belief that the linguistic capabilities of ordinary people (as opposed to those of academics and philosophers) are limited to a recycling of pre-fabricated syntagms and associative complexes (Saussure, 1959: 124).

As is observed by Alvesson and Kärreman (loc. cit.), the primary source for this opinion is the work of Michel Foucault. Hardy and Phillips (2004) cite most of Foucault's oeuvre in its support, but Foucault's major statement on discourse, was *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972, 2002a) and it is this work which is cited by Howarth (2000: 9) in his definition of discourse as 'historically specific systems of meaning which form the identities of subjects and objects'.[1]

Ideas of this kind began to infiltrate 'critical' thinking in organizational studies from about 1990 onwards and critical accounting somewhat earlier (Hopwood, 1987). Though they are not always accompanied by explicit references to Foucault, Alvesson and Kärreman's remarks suggest that many alternative sources, such as Laclau and Mouffe (2001) or Butler (1997), are effectively proxies for Foucault and it is these sources which are cited in the field of critical accounting by Spence (2007) and Roberts (2009), respectively. To the extent that the various vectors of influence trace back to Foucault, what he has to say on the question of discursive constitution is of pivotal importance, the more so because the idea that language conditions and constrains human thought is contrary to the views of most linguists, and more especially those who have adopted a cognitive approach (Evans and Green, 2006).

At the level of the sign, the idea that language conditions thought is conventionally credited to Whorf (1997) and is most famously exemplified at the level of the popular factoid by the Inuit's 'twenty words for snow'. It is these linguistic differentials, so runs the story, which enable the speakers of that language to divide snow into a corresponding 20 varieties. Not only have experiments on the influence of language on perception (of the visual spectrum, for example) consistently failed to verify effects of this kind; Whorf's original data and other anthropological reports of linguistically conditioned perception have also failed to stand up to subsequent examination, not least because the direction of causality between language and perception in these cases can only be a matter of conjecture (Pinker, 1994: 57–65).

The notion that language acts as a constraint on human thought is also difficult to square with the prevalence of linguistic innovation – a phenomenon to which one would have expected post-structuralists to be sensitive, given their penchant for neologism. *The Guardian* (Friday 17th December 2010: 11) recently reported a development in corpora linguistics, in which a

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[1] There is an ambiguity in Howarth's sentence which bears on the theme of this paper. If it is taken to mean that Foucault's subject matter is discourse in general and that all discourse has constitutive properties, that is disputed here, as is the converse position that subjects and objects can be known only through the medium of discourse. If, on the other hand, it means that Foucault's *Archaeology* deals only with discourses which possess constitutive powers, those powers follow as a matter of definition. Whether such discourses exist and in what contexts, on the other hand, is another matter.