



## Foucault's Critique of Modernity

Ishrat Ahmad Dar

Date of Submission: 15-03-2024

Date of Acceptance: 02-04-2024

### Abstract

Foucault's critique of modernity is his particular understanding of power/knowledge systems that govern historical periods, modern and postmodern era. However he argues that it is more relevant to predict modernity as an attitude, one that questions and transfigures the present, at least for the purposes of philosophical questioning. The modernity which Foucault identifies is centered on the development of a new power/knowledge regime which constituted Man as both an object of this system, and as its subject. Foucault's approach to postmodernism is important but he cannot be completely connected with it, because he is liked with complex moments. Foucault's critique of modernity approaches the problems like society, knowledge, power, institutions, and clinics, makes an important influence on postmodern thinking. He used new historical approaches while making critique of modernity, for him we can't reach to reality from a particular point, but we can do this through multiply methods and by different discourses. Through his early works his concern was the emergence for the modern form of administration of social world.

**Keywords:** Foucault, modernity, postmodern, knowledge/power, discourse

### I. Introduction

On one hand Foucault's works includes the theoretical issue of modern reason is considered as a specific mode of thinking on which modernity was established. While on the other side Foucault's thought is concerned with the political and practical problems of modern society and the historical process in which this specific mode of thinking arose during the eighteenth century, thus creating social practices, institutions and modern subjectivity. The main problems of modernity are how the new ideas in science influence the way people thought about the world, and how the new ideas in humanities the people thought about the way people thought about the human beings and its societies. While studying these problems he makes a distinction between classical, modern and

postmodern era and says how humanity is dominated by power.

In this paper an attempt is made to evaluate the critique of modernity in Foucauldian thought. But one important aspect of this approach is his use of historical analysis for understanding the concept of modernity. In most of his works the aim was to write a history of the present, in order to find key practices of modern culture, by placing them in historical perspectives. He welded philosophy and history in order to develop the intensive critique of modern civilization. Behind this his aim was to identify the historical conditions of the rise of reason in western societies, and to analyse the present moment in order to check how we stand in relation or face to face with historical foundation of rationality, as the spirit of modern civilization.

### Foucault and Modernity:

Foucault asserts that interference of modern form of power has created new forms of dominance. His historic philosophical study explains social and political phenomena from the perspective of psychology, punishment, medicine and criminology. His purpose is to criticize history in present context, which problematize modern form of knowledge, institutions and rationality, which seems natural but in real are socio-historical constructions of power and domination. His focus was on discourse and social practices that shapes human subject. In his works he combines pre modern, modern and postmodern moments and makes a distinction between classical and modern period and says how humans are dominated in pre-modern era by power, which has now changed in modern and postmodern era and are dominated in different ways. How the individuals are dominated by discourse, institutions and practices. In his project the birth of the clinics he asserts how our social, political and religious aspects are dominated by medical discourse. He explains the history of medicine and relates it with present practices in order to bring truth together in medicine in modern period. Some of the main problems of modernity such as; how new ideas in science influence the way



people thought and felt about the world. How the new ideas in humanities, the way people thought about human beings and societies, and how the corporates and political leaders use modern ideas to their advantages.

Foucault's critique of humanism and modernity is a development of new perspectives on discourse, society, knowledge and power that has made him an important figure of postmodern thought. His first phase of philosophy deals with a study of historical cases that are mainly related with the present emerging problems of modern human science. In his first writing while discussing the history of madness, he relates it with the emergence of modern concept of madness, in the same way while discussing the history of medicine, he makes critique of modern clinical practices. He used the method of analysis what he called archaeological methodology challenges the way by which knowledge is traditionally examined or analyzed in human science. Simply we can say that archaeology is a way of looking towards history in order to understand the processes that have lead us what we are today. Archaeology works through the documents (archives) of society such as prison records, popular knowledge, journals and so on. That is concerned with the history of social structures that has shaped and produced the limitations of knowledge, truth, ideas and discursive formations in different historical periods. Foucault believes on humanism and accepts the practical application rather than metaphysical. Him aim was to identify and accept reality from all possible sources of discourse. He says;

In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not metaphysical... it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological-and not transcendental-in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events.<sup>1</sup>

Foucault's second phase was genealogy that deals with the intrinsic critique of the present, which is the historical investigative and perspective method that provides individuals the critical skill of investigating and analyzing the relation between human subject, knowledge and power in modern society and theoretically understands how the being is shaped by the historical forces. Genealogy works what people think is possible and reveals the space

of human freedom. Genealogical analysis is a challenge against the traditional historical practices, philosophical norms and establishes the ideas of knowledge, power and truth. And it searches what we take for granted, what seems to be absolute and undermines natural events as concepts and confined by discourse and to open an opportunities for the future. As an analysis of the historical and geographical institutions of clinics, prisons, schools and hospitals, Foucault's method inspires to reappraise and to reevaluate the discourse and human knowledge on madness, disease and criminality to understand their effects and how they work to limit people in modern world.

Foucault offers and advanced and broad critique of modernity, and believes that modern rationality is a strong force, but they focused on the colonization of nature, and following control of psychic and social existence, and he focuses on how the individuals are dominated by different forms of social institutions, practices and discourses. So it goes on to organize and to regulate all forms of historical experiences by a logical construction of discourse and knowledge, which Foucault says, will be the systematic form of language arranged with social practices. And he claims that different human practices like madness, sexuality, became the matter of deep analysis and inquiry. They are broadly reestablished within scientific and rationalistic frame of situation, and within the modern discourse of language thus makes available for management and control. Since eighteen century was the era of great outbreak whereby, the discourse on human behavior has come under the practice of modern discourse and under the rules of power and knowledge. He explains modernity as:

Modernity is often characterized in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment. And this is indeed what Baudelaire seems to be saying when he defines modernity as "the ephemeral, the fleeting, and the contingent." ..... Modernity is the attitude that makes it possible to grasp the "heroic" aspect of the present moment. Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to "heroize" the present.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore Foucault's position was aggressively opposite to modernity and develops an important postmodern character of his philosophy. Foucault describes modern rationality, subjectivity and institutions as sources of domination. But

<sup>1</sup> P. Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon Books, New York 1984.p 46

<sup>2</sup> P. Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon Books, New York 1984.p 39



modern theories see truth, knowledge as neutral, universal, objective or a source for progress and freedom. For Foucault they are the vital constituents of power and domination. This imperative enlightens his historical approach on society, political thinking and takes various forms, of historical methodology which holds it specifically and discontinuity in discourse, and to rethink that power distributes through various social sites, and a critic of global and totalizing modes of thoughts. Foucault's analysis on modernity is from different viewpoints on institutions and modern discourse. Nietzsche's view is that perspectivism rejects existence of facts and there are only interpretations of world. We understand things from a particular point of view, but the world has no single meaning, it has numerous meanings and interpretations. We are locked in perspectives, which distort the appearance of reality. A perspectivist searches for multiply meanings of phenomena, and insists there is no limit on way the world can be interpreted. But Foucault's analysis of modernity is from the perspectives of medicine; psychiatric, sexuality and criminality all of them overlap multiply ways and provides different options for the construction of modern subject and modern society.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge is perspectival in nature and requires various viewpoints to interpret a heterogeneous reality.

Foucault rejects philosophical claim to understand systematically all forms of reality from one philosophical system or from one central point. Foucault's belief is that discourse is such a complex reality that we can approach through it by different methods and at various levels. Hence no single method of interpretation or theory by itself can hold the plurality of discourse, mode of power and institutions that creates modern society. Foucault provides somehow a new conceptual idea of present and suggests that the beginning of modernity is crossed when the power is matter of administration of life.<sup>4</sup> This forms the key idea for the Foucault's concept of modern society. The primary idea of modern period is by the capitalistic mode of production. The struggle is for the dominance within society, therefore the class struggle begins between working class and bourgeoisies. This was the base for Marxist idea of modernity. The other important claim of modernity is the rejection of traditionalism in the sense of the evolution of the reason. Weber

supports this claim that scientific knowledge is the most important model for the maturity of reason. He argued that the evolution of a rational but depersonalized system of administration is the representative feature of modern society and one of the separating by-products of the spread of enlightened practices.<sup>5</sup>

Foucault's important claim is to explain knowledge from different perspectives, his aim is to critique historical period that problematize modern form of knowledge. Foucault's focuses on different social and discursive practices that play an important role in the creation of human subject. Throughout his philosophical analysis the different strategies by which social and personal identities are generated. These means are the dividing practices which are operated between normal and abnormal and the rules and norms that produce these differences. The modern individual in dominated by different forces. He talks about how modern rationality and institutions are the constructs or sources of domination. Modern theories consider knowledge and truth as objective and universal and a vehicle for the emancipation and progress. For him they are components of power and domination. The knowledge produced in medicine, economics and other human sciences is the part of power of institutions that has emerged under these systems.

## II. Conclusion:

Through this discussion we can conclude that for Foucault knowledge is not independent, and there are different alternatives or discourses through which we can reach to reality, but not by a single source or particular perspective. For him knowledge is always related with power and they are interconnected and interrelated with each other which is scattered in different forms. His concern was with the emergence of modern form of administration of the social world. How individuals in modern societies are dominated by discourses, institutions and by modern industrial powers. The modernity which Foucault analyzed is based on the development of a new power/knowledge regime which considers Man as both an object of this system, and as its subject.

<sup>3</sup> S. Best & D. Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Macmillan 1999 p. 39- 40

<sup>4</sup> S. Panneerselvam, *A Critique of Foucault's Power and Knowledge*, Indian Philosophical Quarterly XXVII 1&2 Jan. Apr. 2000 p 16

<sup>5</sup> A. Mchoul & W. Grace, *A Foucault Primer, Discourse, Power and the Subject*, Melbourne University Press 1993 p 62



**References:**

- [1]. P. Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon Books, New York 1984
- [2]. Foucault, M. (1977 [1975]). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: Penguin
- [3]. Foucault M. 1965 [1961]. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. New York: Vint
- [4]. S. Best & D. Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Macmillan 1999
- [5]. S. Panneerselvam, *A Critique of Foucault's Power and Knowledge*, *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* XXVII 1&2 Jan. Apr. 2000
- [6]. A. Mchoul & W. Grace, *A Foucault Primer, Discourse, Power and the Subject*, Melbourne University Press 1993
- [7]. Taylor, C. (1984). 'Foucault on Freedom and Truth', *Political Theory* 12 (2): 152 – 183
- [8]. Foucault, M. (1981a). *The order of discourse*. In R. Young (Ed)(1981), *Untying the text: a post-structural anthology* (pp. 48- 78). Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- [9]. Foucault, M. (1979b). *My body, this paper, this fire*. *Oxford Literary Review* 4,