

The Destiny of Curriculum Theory in the Light of Postmodern Philosophy: A Case Study on Foucauldian Doctorins

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ABSTRACT

Michel Foucault, arguing from a different standpoint, developed a relativist view of knowledge in which power and knowledge are inextricably related. Modernist curriculum thinkers argued that knowledge needs to have its roots in the disciplines and that pedagogic knowledge at its best reflects the optimum translation of this knowledge into the curriculum. For Foucault, this transcendental move to provide a foundationalist view of the curriculum is misguided in that it is not possible to have any certainty about the correctness or otherwise of how the curriculum should be constructed. Foucault understood the disciplines as discursive formations, as having no foundational status, and as being embedded in history.

Key words: Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge, Discipline, Disciplinary Power, Philosophy Of Difference, Postmodernist Curriculum Theory.

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INTRODUCTION

Foucault's work has had great influence in different academic domains, not least in education. Several curriculum theorists have tried to employ Foucauldian concepts in their theory, focusing especially on the notion of power/knowledge. Examples include: Cleo Cherryholmes, Thomas S. Popkewitz, Peter McLaren, and Henry A. Giroux. They devote their attentions to the understanding of the relations between power and knowledge, and integrates Foucault's concept of power/knowledge into his theory of critical pedagogy. The purpose of this paper is to understand Michel Foucault's notion of power/knowledge and to inquire into the ways this notion has been adopted in curriculum theory. The paper is driven by the belief that there are problems with this take-up of Foucault's thought, regarding both the substance of interpretation and the ways in which such interpretations then settle into the role of received ideas. In other words, the reception of power/knowledge as such is usually governed by certain orthodox ways of thinking, and by the specific power/knowledge complex of the field of study itself. While my main purpose is to provide a criticism of certain ways in which power/knowledge has been taken up, I also hope to show the potency of Foucault's idea in this respect in relation to curriculum theory. I shall try to show what the real meaning of power/knowledge is in Foucault's account. Finally, I shall try to show the ways in which Foucault is relevant to curriculum theory, focusing especially on its potential for helping us towards a rethinking of the teacher's role and of curriculum policy (Cherryholmes, 1988; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993; Deleuze, 2006; Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980).

The explanation of Foucault's some key concepts

Before entering the discussion, it is necessary to define some Foucauldian concepts.

Power: Foucault argues a number of points in relation to power and offers definitions that are directly opposed to more traditional liberal and Marxist theories of power:

1. power is not a thing but a relation
2. power is not simply repressive but it is productive.
3. power is not simply a property of the State. Power is not something that is exclusively localized in government and the State (which is not a universal essence). Rather, power is exercised throughout the social body.
4. power operates at the most micro levels of social relations. Power is omnipresent at every level of the social body.
5. the exercise of power is strategic and war-like. (Michel-foucault.com/key concepts: p.9).

Power-Knowledge: One of the most important features of Foucault's view is that mechanisms of power produce different types of knowledge which collate information on people's activities and existence. The knowledge gathered in this way further reinforces exercises of power. Foucault refutes the idea that he makes the claim 'knowledge is power' and says that he is interested in studying the complex relations between power and knowledge without saying they are the same thing (Michel-foucault.com/key concepts: p.9).

Resistance to power and the limits of power: Foucault suggests that there are a number of ways in which the exercise of power can be resisted. He argues at one point that resistance is coextensive with power, namely as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. If there is no such thing as a society without relations of power, this does not mean that existing power relations cannot be criticized. It is not a question of an 'ontological opposition' between power and resistance, but a matter of quite specific and changing struggles in space and time. There is always the possibility of resistance no matter how oppressive the system (Michel-foucault.com/key concepts: p.10).

Discipline: Discipline is a mechanism of power which regulates the behaviour of individuals in the social body. This is done by regulating the organisation of space (architecture etc.), of time (timetables) and people's activity and behaviour (drills, posture, movement). It is enforced with the aid of complex systems of surveillance. Foucault emphasizes that power is not discipline, rather discipline is simply one way in which power can be exercised. He also uses the term 'disciplinary society', discussing its history and the origins and disciplinary institutions such as prisons, hospitals, asylums, schools and army barracks. Foucault also specifies that when he speaks of a 'disciplinary society' he does not mean a 'disciplined society' (Michel-foucault.com/key concepts: p.3).

Discourse: Discourse is a rather slippery notion in Foucault's work but at the most basic level he uses the term to refer to the material verbal traces left by history. He also uses it to describe 'a certain "way of speaking"'. (Foucault, 1972: 193; Michel-foucault.com/key concepts: p.3).

Episteme: This term, which Foucault introduces in his book *The Order of Things*, refers to the orderly 'unconscious' structures underlying the production of scientific knowledge in a particular time and place. It is the 'epistemological field' which forms the conditions of possibility for knowledge in a given time and place. It has often been compared to T.S Kuhn's notion of paradigm (Michel-foucault.com/key concepts: p.4).

Power/Knowledge in Foucauldian curriculum theories

The theories that I will illustrate here derives from several curriculum theorists who predominantly use Foucault's thought, specifically the concept of power/knowledge. The theorists on whom I shall draw are Cleo Cherryholmes, Henry A. Giroux, and Stephen J. Ball. I have been partly motivated to write their ideas because of my belief that Foucault is commonly misinterpreted in curriculum sphere. His ideas about power/knowledge tend to be grafted onto prevailing ideas about the operation of power, along more or less critical theory or neo-Marxist lines. What I have tried to do is to take some examples of such misappropriation of Foucault's work, in order to identify weakness or problems of a similar kind in the work of leading curriculum theorists. In Cherryholmes' view, the constitution of rules results from choices – for example, the standardized exam is a way of distinguishing between the cognitive abilities of different students, and this distinction affects their future choices of schools. However, Cherryholmes suggests that ideology is the main origin controlling these choices. He says: "choices cannot be made without reference to a value, set of values, criteria, or interests" (Cherryholmes, 1988: 4). By drawing on Foucault's notion of discursive practices, Cherryholmes emphasizes the influence and the importance of ideology. Ideology structures educational discourses and the taken-for-granted lived experience of everyday classroom life. Because of ideology, we have shared ideas about what is true or what is false. And hence, educationalists choose activities that are coincident with normative commitments. Cherryholmes claims, therefore, that "ideology and power arrangements infiltrate our thinking and actions; they shape our subjectivities, that is, how and what we think about ourselves and so act" (Cherryholmes, 1988: 6). This is the fundamental point in Cherryholmes' employment of Foucault. Moreover, Cherryholmes draws on Foucault's perspective to see textbooks as discourses which relate to political production. He points out that "Foucault shows textbooks to be political, material products that represent a privileged way of seeing things, privileged by means of power, position, tradition, and so forth" (Cherryholmes, 1988: 61). For Cherryholmes, this political production or power hides commitments to the effects of efficiency, control, manipulation, instrumentalism, and utilitarianism. And these effects derive from ideological bias. He adds "textbooks are products of human culture that present partial, local organizations of meanings. It seems their fate neverGiroux is normally in the category of American critical pedagogy. His perception of power/knowledge can be seen in his collaborative work with Aronowitz. In *Education still under siege* (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993), Aronowitz and Giroux employ Foucault's notion of power/knowledge to develop a language of possibility in their curriculum theory. A starting point in their account is the denial that power is treated as a negative force that works in the interests of domination. They consider, in the classical Marxist view, that power relates to knowledge primarily through the ways in which it serves to distort, or mystify the truth in favour of dominant classes or people. The economic and social conditions of knowledge are examined through ideological critique. Knowledge is always analyzed for its distortions and mystifications. Thus, school knowledge and culture are reduced to serving the interests of privileged groups. The question of how power works in schools is almost limited to recording "how it reproduces relations of domination and subordination through various school practices" (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993:

150). They argue that the notion of power must be rescued from its current usage if schools are to be seen as active sites where possibilities exist. They point out:

We believe that power is both a negative and positive force. Its character is dialectical, and its mode of operation is always more than simply repressive. In actuality, power is at the root of all forms of behaviour in which people say no, struggle, resist, use oppositional modes of discourse, and fight for a different vision of the future. (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993),

Since it is inappropriate to regard power/knowledge as a tree-like mode, I ask: "How can we reconceive curriculum theory in the light of rhizomatic power/knowledge?" Following the tradition of critical theory or Marxism, many contemporary curriculum theories invest the project of unmasking social control and dominant ideology in curricula, and attempt to solve these problems. In this way, certain questions are raised such as Apple's "Whose knowledge is of most worth?" (Apple, 1990: vii), and Ball's "Whose values are validated in policy, and whose are not?" (Ball, 1990: 3). Owing to the intervention of dominant groups, curriculum is seen as a political instrument for oppression and destruction, in which the language of power is seen as being hidden. The idea of hidden curricula is one of these examples. If curriculum theory is not for the sake of exposing something hidden, what is it for? In an interview with Foucault, Deleuze says a theory as like "a box of tools" (Deleuze, 2006:208) that has nothing to do with the signifier, but is useful and functional. A box of tools does not function as bricks to construct a fortress of theory. It is like a pair of glasses, in Deleuze's metaphor, directed to the outside in order to see the broader view outside. A theory, therefore, is "an instrument for multiplication, and it also multiplies itself" (Deleuze, 2006:208). In other words, a theory functions to revolt against the oppression of a single and global form so as to make possible multiple perspectives of our visibility and statements. A theory also reaches its multiplicity, attains its richness in this way. I consider that Foucault's views concerning theory chime with this idea. Instead of serving to apply practice, Foucault regards theory itself as a practice (Deleuze, 2006:208). We may think that of it as the practice of making use of "a box of tools" in Deleuze's terms. In this practice, power/knowledge is productive, can be rhizomatic in connection with a continuous process of production for self-emancipation, self-improvement and self-realization, as in Gordon's suggestion. This practice opens a field of possibility. On the one hand, individuals are an effect of power/knowledge; on the other hand, individuals are also the agents of power/knowledge who are able to break through the domination that power/knowledge causes. A curriculum theory is not applied to construct a universal operation for transformation, as the presupposition in Cherryholmes, Giroux or Ball's theories, but comprises a knowledge of self to break the confinement of dominant power/knowledge, and "to challenge the idea of a sovereign subject" (Foucault, 1991:61)—an ideal subject given in its unity. For Foucault, this is the best way to cross over and to go beyond the limits of power/knowledge. The concept of "emancipation", "transformation" or "empowerment" in curriculum theory can be reconsidered in this sense. The practice of emancipation ought to be undertaken from our own subject, rather than from subjugated groups or something else. Therefore, we may see curriculum theory as "a curriculum of the self". On the one hand, the self is a point of departure to which curriculum attends. On the other hand, the process of self-transformation itself is also one type of curriculum—an on-going journey of self learning and self-creation.

The implications of Foucauldian theory of curriculum

Since Foucault's power/knowledge is not as it is imagined to be in Giroux's work, how can we consider the implications of power/knowledge in curriculum? In my view, power/knowledge has implications for a rethinking of the teacher's role and of curriculum policy. In this paper, it will be elaborated on both of these points in what follows.

What is the role of teacher in Foucauldian curriculum?

Giroux suggests that teachers should be transformative intellectuals whose position is like that of social reformers, taking on a very heavy responsibility for social reconstruction. How may we think of teachers' role by drawing on a Foucauldian perspective? In an interview with Deleuze, Foucault illustrates what he takes to be the intellectual's role in the following terms:

The intellectual's role is no longer to place himself "somewhat ahead and to the side" in order to express the stifled truth of the collectivity; rather, it is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of "knowledge," "truth," "consciousness," and "discourse" (Bouchard 1977: 208).

Unlike Giroux, in my opinion, Foucault's intention is by no means one of sketching the contours of what a teacher should be. He does not attempt to look for a universal value or universal rationality, as might be found in Kant and Habermas. Nor does he claim that "there is a common form of morality which is acceptable by everyone, and everyone has to submit to it." (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986: 118) On the contrary, as teachers and active subjects, rather than passive followers of established knowledge and truth, we ourselves have responsibility for pondering "what makes us what we are?", and for deciding "what kind of Through power/knowledge, we can come

to realize how the image of a standard teacher has been embedded deeply in our minds. There is a binary distinction between good teachers and bad teachers. Power shapes the characteristics of what is acknowledged as an excellent teacher, and it forms the discourses determining the specific role of teachers. By means of a pervasive strategy based on disciplinary power, involving surveillance and hierarchical observation, teachers normalize themselves in such a way as to become accepted and to be objectified. By the perpetual spirals of power and pleasure (this pleasure could be caused by praise or compliments), this normalizing procedure has been stabilized. And finally, teachers govern themselves automatically to fit in with this principle of normalization. However, it would be arbitrary to regard these disciplinary procedures as mechanisms of subjugation. These discourses of the role of teachers derive from power/knowledge; they come from the collective rationality of human beings. They could be right or, more probably, could be wrong. Foucauldian thinking arouses our consciousness to reflect on this modern rationality and on our subjectivity. It reveals the danger of our dependence on this effect of normalization and, in contrast, the possibility of our practice going beyond this. If this effect is tolerable, there need be no problem in following it continuously. Yet, if it is intolerable³ and causes the distortion of our subjectivity, we have unceasingly to search for other alternatives so as to establish a new subject and to avoid being objectified and instrumentalized. In this sense, the role of teachers is not fixed. It is always to be found in the course of teachers' comportment of themselves as free beings (Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1991; Foucault, 1977; Smart, 2002).

How should curriculum policy be formed in Foucauldian approach?

On Foucault's account, curriculum might be seen as a cultural practice within the influence of power/knowledge. Our thinking is then no longer focused on how to empower subordinated people, in order to improve to use the curriculum as a means of improving their disadvantageous situation in the educational process. Rather than the repressive forces of social class or the economy, they are social requirement and economic, political development those shapes the formation of curriculum policy. Hence, Michael Apple's question, "Whose knowledge is of most worth?" (Apple, 1990: vii), which reflects the sovereign notion of power, can be seen as less pertinent. It is not so much as a result of ideology, control and oppression, but rather through more complex situations and via polymorphous tactics that curriculum policy is formed. For example, in the 1950s, an event that was a special focus of attention for people in America was the Soviet launch of Sputnik, which brought to light a torrent of information about education. National policymakers translated their growing unease about security threats into a concern over the public school's role in producing scientists, mathematicians, and engineers. The motivation for this was military and scientific competition between United States and Soviet Russia. Here, the security gap was linked to deficiencies in the nation's technical and scientific schooling (Cuban, 1992: 226-227). Curriculum policy, thus, is guided by this concern to develop scientific and mathematic projects for resolving national crises. This example more or less reflects Herbert Spencer's question, "What knowledge is of most worth?"⁴ We might conceive of this historical event in terms of bio-power. "Power" in curriculum policy was operated to guarantee national security. "Knowledge" became a matter of strategy geared towards military competition, and involving the tactics of organizing the science and mathematics curriculum in different levels of school education. "Truth" within this curriculum discourse is shaped by the maxim: catch up with Soviet Russia as soon as possible. The Soviet Russia has now disintegrated. However, some things might have not been changed. Martial competition has been substituted by on-going global economic competition; and the main role could be changed from America into my country—Taiwan. The prominence of the science and mathematics curriculum has already been displaced by the importance attached to certain subjects or skills that are deemed helpful in getting a good job and in earning much money. Therefore, regarding the choice of study, students prefer certain practical subjects like computer science or business administration to some fundamental subjects such as: philosophy or physics. As we see, our curriculum policy has still been inevitably influenced by bio-power. Foucault warns us that it is not the unchangeable truth we should rely on perpetually. Bio-power decides what teachers teach, what students learn, and what schools function for. On the one hand, it may enhance national economic development. On the other hand, the subjectivity of teachers and students may be distorted unconsciously through this process. For instance, the conflicts and paradoxes among economic benefits, administrative efficiency and educational ideals have been put on the stage constantly. In these circumstances, we may need a kind of Foucauldian reflection on our current situation in order to understand how a certain normalization become embedded in curriculum policy, how it determines what education can be, and how it makes us what we are (Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1991; Foucault, 1977; Smart, 2002).

Does Foucault's theory of curriculum entail relativism?

Why then is the issue of relativism important for the study of the curriculum? We first need to distinguish between the different forms of relativism. In the philosophical literature four types of relativism are discussed. The

first of these is moral relativism. This is where there are no universal grounds for suggesting that one version of morality is superior to another. This is supported by the fact that moral systems vary across cultures, historical periods and different people within the same culture. It would be false to infer from this that there are no moral absolutes, as one of those systems might be right and all the others wrong. However, in the absence of other arguments to the contrary, this would suggest, but not prove conclusively, that there are no moral absolutes. Again, there is no suggestion here that moral relativists should be entirely sceptical about the existence of moral absolutes, though perhaps this gives them good grounds for being sceptical about identifying what they might be. Even if most societies or indeed every society shared some moral belief, this in turn would not prove the existence of moral absolutes, since all of them might be wrong. Furthermore, moral relativists might claim an allegiance to a moral system, which is embedded in the society to which they belong, without at the same time subscribing to any absolute or universal system of morality. The second type of relativism is conceptual relativism. Different people in different cultures and in different time periods vary in the way they organize experience. They therefore operate with different conceptual frameworks. As with moral relativism, the argument of variety does not disprove the existence of some universal conceptual system by which reality can best be known. However, it is more difficult to believe in conceptual relativism than it is to believe in moral relativism, because whereas the one is concerned with behaviours and right actions, the other is concerned with accessing the world. A conceptual relativist would argue that thought, belief and knowledge systems are embedded in particular social arrangements, which cannot be changed through individual willpower, but nevertheless do not persist over time and are different in different cultures. Immersion in one culture means that it is only with the greatest effort, if at all, that a person can access another culture, and even then, they are stepping outside their native culture and entering a new one. The two cultures are still incommensurable. The third type is perceptual relativism. This is a sub-set of conceptual relativism, and the same dilemma applies here as with the first two categories. Whorf (Whorf, 1954: 213) defines perceptual relativism in the following way: We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. Perceptual or radical relativists argue that there is no grounding in nature that compels us to organise it in one way rather than another. The fourth type is truth relativism. Radical relativists would argue that there are no universal absolutes embedded in logic or rationality. Different societies have their own systems of logic, their own sets of criteria for determining the truth of the matter, and their own procedures for carrying this out. To understand another culture, therefore, requires a complete reappraisal of how one thinks and therefore how one behaves. A number of objections to these various forms of relativism has been noted. There is a logical objection to epistemic relativism. Since relativism denotes a universality, i.e. that all knowledge is relative to the values of the knower, or the disciplinary matrix in which the researcher is embedded, or social, geographical and political arrangements, then it undermines itself, since this implies a universal statement which is denied by the substance of the argument. Furthermore, there is an evidential objection to relativism. Though judgements between statements about reality are difficult to make, it is possible to discriminate between sound evidence and unsound evidence, and this evidence provides the means by which such judgements can be made. This argument against relativism acknowledges that judgements that are made are based on criteria which are developed in communities, but it is only through activities which underpin such communities, i.e. peer review, that such criteria can be developed and used. There is a moral objection to relativism. If all values, including values about apt or false research accounts, are located in historical and social arrangements, then there is no way of effectively choosing one version over another, and this leads to an 'anything goes' thesis or an anarchic view of the world. Finally, there are a number of conceptual objections to epistemic relativism. It is contrasted in an absolute way with a definitive account of reality; this creates a dichotomy between the two states which does not allow the possibility of a middle position; and furthermore, if a middle position was allowed, then this position would have to be defined in terms of its polar extremes. Relativism at one end of the continuum is contrasted with a concept at the other end which is not the opposite of it – a false comparison is made – and further to this, the one extreme cannot be defined in opposition to what it is not, except in so far as it trivialises it. All these different forms of relativism are essentially anti-realist, though more moderate relativists suggest that the world can be real even if there are no absolute or universal standards by which it can be judged. Thus reality exerts an influence on the way it is described which means that it cannot be described in every possible way. Indeed, as we have seen, some philosophers like Strawson (Strawson, 1959) have even suggested that there are some universals of coherent thought, which would set limits to those forms of life that individuals are embedded within and the way those individuals can process reality. As we saw in the previous chapter, attempts have been made to anchor knowledge in the disciplines and thus avoid these forms of relativism. For example, Hirst (Hirst, 1974) proposed that the curriculum should be structured in terms of distinctions made between the forms of knowledge. These disciplined forms of knowledge may be distinguished in a number of ways. Each discipline has

developed a set of concepts that organises experiences and thoughts in particular ways. In religious studies emphasis is given to a notion of spirituality which depends on a metaphysical notion of God. In physics, concepts such as atom and molecule have been developed to explain the physical world. Each discipline has its own form of determining truth from falsehood; scientists use processes of observation and testing to determine the truth value of a theory; mathematical statements, on the other hand, are true by reason of the logical rules that constitute the system in which they work. Thus each discipline can be distinguished by epistemological criteria for how statements of truth and falsehood are verified. Disciplines therefore are not just differentiated through these epistemological criteria, but also through a rejection of the tenets of another discipline. So some physicists would want to argue that metaphysical speculation, the central tenet of theology, is an illegitimate standard to use in evaluating human affairs. Thus disciplines compete by offering rival versions of epistemology. The techniques and methods that have been developed by practitioners are different in each discipline and act as markers for distinguishing one discipline from another. So, the historian has been inducted into a particular way of understanding, collecting and collating evidence that may be significantly different from the experimental methods adopted by scientists. Finally, practitioners within the various disciplines draw boundaries round their activities, and specify the type of problems that they set out to solve. Notwithstanding these differences between the forms, they are all considered to be expressions of a universal notion of rationality. Foucault was not convinced by this, and despite his specific denial, ultimately grounds rationality in socio-cultural and historical contexts. This means that the distinction he wants to make between judgemental and epistemic rationality is an illegitimate one. Disciplinary knowledge comprises forms of rationality which evolve through different epistemes so that individuals see the world in different ways in different time periods and places. His concern is to describe the emergence of different forms of knowledge that literally make possible genetics for example, or statistics or madness (Foucault, 1977) or confession. It is the rules of the specific and historically located discursive formations and complexes of them which constitute what can or cannot be included in a curriculum. (Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1980; Foucault, 1991; Smart, 2002)

CONCLUSION

Power is more productive than repressive in Foucault's account. Foucault criticizes the concept of power put forward by Marxists. According to a Marxist account, power is regarded as an instrument of class domination in Western capitalism. Foucault argues, however, that "the mechanics of power in themselves were never analysed" In Foucault's view, the effect of power should not be put in negative terms once and for all. On the contrary, "power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. Though power is exercised for economic utility that imposes on human subjects, where the disciplinary mechanisms cannot be separated from the demographic upsurge in the eighteenth century, or the growth in economic production extracting useful force from the body. As we showed, according to Foucault and Foucauldian thinkers, like in other fields, power and its manifestations play a major role in curriculum design.

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