

The Study of Institutions in the Understanding of Contemporary Social Processes

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Introduction

In the last few centuries institutions such as the school, the factory, and the hospital have become features central to most environments of human existence. They even seem to provide assistance and inspiration. However, they also make constant demands on individuals for the latter to adjust to and comply with their internal procedures in the names, for instance, of efficiency and improved service. Only in the very remote and under-developed regions of the world do such institutions still remain exclusive and somehow detached from the daily lives of ordinary individuals and communities, or else their interaction is discontinued and/or sporadic.

Institutions are constantly studied by those in government positions. Large financial and human resources are devoted to their 'improvement' through the identification and transfer of certain discourses, relationships, and identities. In this sense, business concepts such as targets, the customer/client, and quality have been transferred from the factory to the school and the hospital. Some of these discourses, relationships, and identities are created within institutions; others are instead imported from other areas of human experience.

Instead of focusing on how to improve organisations, this paper explores, following Foucault's post-Structuralist ideas, the importance of institutions in the study of wider social processes. These processes emerge from the problematisation of certain domains of human experience. The role of institutions is, then, to contribute to their ordering - governance. Finally, it will be argued that this type of investigation is both critical and systemic.

The starting point for the study of institutions: discourses, relationships, and identities

It is very clear that when conducting his critical analyses, Foucault starts by studying the development of certain institutions such as the prison or the clinic. However, even though he is interested in specific historical events, he is not trying merely to be descriptive, nor does he try to provide advice to present policy makers. He does not even claim that his analyses are definitive, or are superior to any other historical investigation.

Nor is Foucault interested in particular personalities; he is, rather, interested in identifying certain *discourses* that take a particular institution as their main subject, the *social relations* to which these refer, and the *identities* offered to/imposed upon

The Study of Institutions

individuals. This is to say, the focus of a particular analysis is to describe the interplay between these dimensions (and the changes observed over time), within the context of that particular institution.

In the case of the clinic, for example, he maps the development and evolution of different *discourses/knowledge* regarding health/illness, treatments, medical practitioners, patients, and so on. This is conducted in relation to certain *social/power relations*, for instance, how the relationship doctor-patient is defined and how it evolves over time. The third dimension highlights the *identities* that the institution provides for/imposes upon individuals when, for instance, they walk into a hospital. An individual may exchange his/her jacket for a white coat and become a doctor/nurse; a doctor can become a patient once s/he is informed of an adverse test result. S/he can even be 'sectioned' if labelled mentally unstable as a result of a particular test.

Obviously, this model of analysis is just an analytical tool as it would be very difficult to separate discourses, social relations, and identities within the day-to-day life of the institution.

From institutions to institutionalisation

The study of the changes that take place within a particular institution is not the final outcome of this type of research. For example, in his study of prisons, Foucault was able to expand the analysis of an institution (the prison) to encompass the process of institutionalisation. It was through "expanding" his studies about prisons that he could say that institutions "constitute what one might call, enlarging a little the sense of the word, disciplines" (Foucault, 1982, p. 219). In fact, the outcome of Foucault's analysis of institutions is more an explanation of an historical process of disciplining in society than a description of the functioning of a particular institution.

What is to be understood by the disciplining of societies in Europe since the eighteenth century is ... that an increasingly better invigilated process of adjustment has been sought after - more and more rational and economic - between productive activities, resources of communication and the play of power relations. (Foucault, 1982, p. 219)

In summary, the study of institutions is no more than a methodological tool used in understanding wider social processes. The importance of institutions, as we shall see later on, is that within them, certain *discourses, social relationships, and identities* become visible as they are crystallised according to a particular formula, i.e., the institution itself. However, this is an endless process. If it is clear that institutions attempt at colonising every aspect of human experience, there is still ample scope for resistance – freedom.

The reform

As can be seen, the production of institutions is not the main goal of contemporary society. Institutions merely constitute a tool; they are created, modified, and disbanded. However, there could also be a co-dependent relationship between institutions and those whom they normalise/target. To different degrees, they are symbiotic. Such a claim could give the impression that institutions somehow have a life of their own. In this sense, Foucault was able to illustrate how, when the dominant discourse within an institution faces struggles against the forms of normalisation it promotes, or when serious criticisms are raised because of its apparent failure, it calls for a “reform”. Through the “reform” process, the dominant discourse will try to preserve the particular arrangement which organises the relations amongst individuals within that institution. In order to illustrate this point Foucault (1977a) highlights that:

It should be noted that this monotonous critique of the prison always takes one of two directions: either that the prison was insufficiently corrective, and that the penitentiary technique was still at a rudimentary stage; or that in attempting to be corrective it lost its power as punishment, that the true penitentiary technique was rigour, and that prison was a double economic error: directly, by its intrinsic cost and, indirectly, by the cost of the delinquency that it did not abolish. The answer to these criticisms was invariably the same: the reintroduction of the invariable principles of penitentiary technique. For a century and a half the prison has always been offered as its own remedy: the reactivation of the penitentiary technique as the only means of overcoming their perpetual failure; the realisation of the corrective project as the only method of overcoming the impossibility of implementing it... the reintroduction, under the disguise of a new reform, of the same penitentiary principles of which such wonderful results are still expected today... (p. 268)

The main dimensions to be considered when the analysis of a particular institution is undertaken have been illustrated; it has also been demonstrated that wider social processes, and not the study of particular institutions, form the main goal of this type of research. Furthermore, it can be argued that the creation of institutions constitutes part of the answer to the problematisation of a particular domain of human experience, e.g., madness, punishment, and sexuality. That is to say, Foucault studied the asylum, as he was interested in how the notion of madness/mental health was produced and modified. If it is true that the asylum provided a natural point of reference, it is also the case that different institutions may also address mental health/illness.

From these issues certain questions emerge: Is there anything outside institutions? Is there anything other than institutions worth examining?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to introduce the concept of *dispositif*.

The concept of *dispositif*.

The concept of *dispositif* gathers under its banner not only institutions, but also the different bodies of knowledge and forms of self-understanding that are not exclusively confined to particular institutions. That is to say, it includes the totality of institutions and what lies beyond them. In other words, what Foucault wants to encapsulate with this concept is the irregular, heterogeneous ensemble of discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulations, law, administrative measures, scientific statements - in short, as he states, the said as much as the unsaid.

The concept of *dispositif* has a two-fold methodological role in the analysis of institutions. Firstly, from the endless variety of elements (for example, those quoted above) that constitute a particular historical moment, it is possible to select a few to generate a domain of human experience upon which we can focus our studies. For example, the scientific discourse about madness and the institutional practices in hospitals are the initial elements used by Foucault to determine a domain of human experience that he analyses as a *dispositif* – Figure 1.

Secondly, the goal of the research should be to decipher this *dispositif* as it exists in a particular historical moment: that is, how the practices that organise and govern human actions in relation to a particular human experience (e.g., madness) are structured. For example, Foucault's study of madness is not intended merely to identify a set of institutional practices and a scientific discourse, but rather to explore how this human experience is organised in a particular historical moment, and how the characterisation of this human experience changes over time.

As a consequence, Foucault's historical investigation is intended to explore the transformation in the description of a particular domain of human experience - as far as this domain of human experience is perceived as problematic. For instance, it is possible to see how an institution, in a particular epoch, is responsible for the prescription of certain social practices that determine what is, and what is not, allowed regarding a particular human experience.

It has been claimed above that the human experience under investigation must be perceived as a problem, to which the institution is simply part of its answer. The other elements that constitute the way the problem is defined can be found outside the institution. As Foucault explains:

Problematization does not mean representation of a pre-existing object, nor the creation by discourse of an object that does not exist. It is the totality of discursive or non-discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.) (Foucault, 1990, p. 257)

More explicitly, in relation to the problematisation of madness Foucault (1990) says that the question was how and why, at a given moment, madness was problematised through a certain institutional practice and a certain apparatus of knowledge.

The Study of Institutions

To summarise, we have seen that Foucault's analysis of institutions is not limited to describing the process of institutionalisation as the "crystallisation" of, amongst other things, social/power relations. It also attempts to uncover the formation processes of the *dispositif*: i.e., the irregular and heterogeneous body of practices and discourses that are developed to define and give answer to a particular problematisation. The role of institutions is, then, to contribute to the ordering (governance) of some of these practices and discourses at a particular historical moment.

I have also highlighted that the perception of any human experience, to which the institution makes reference, changes according to different historical settings. In this context, I will attempt to discuss, finally, how it is possible to formulate an investigation of a particular domain of human experience in terms of what, at a given moment, is perceived as a problem.

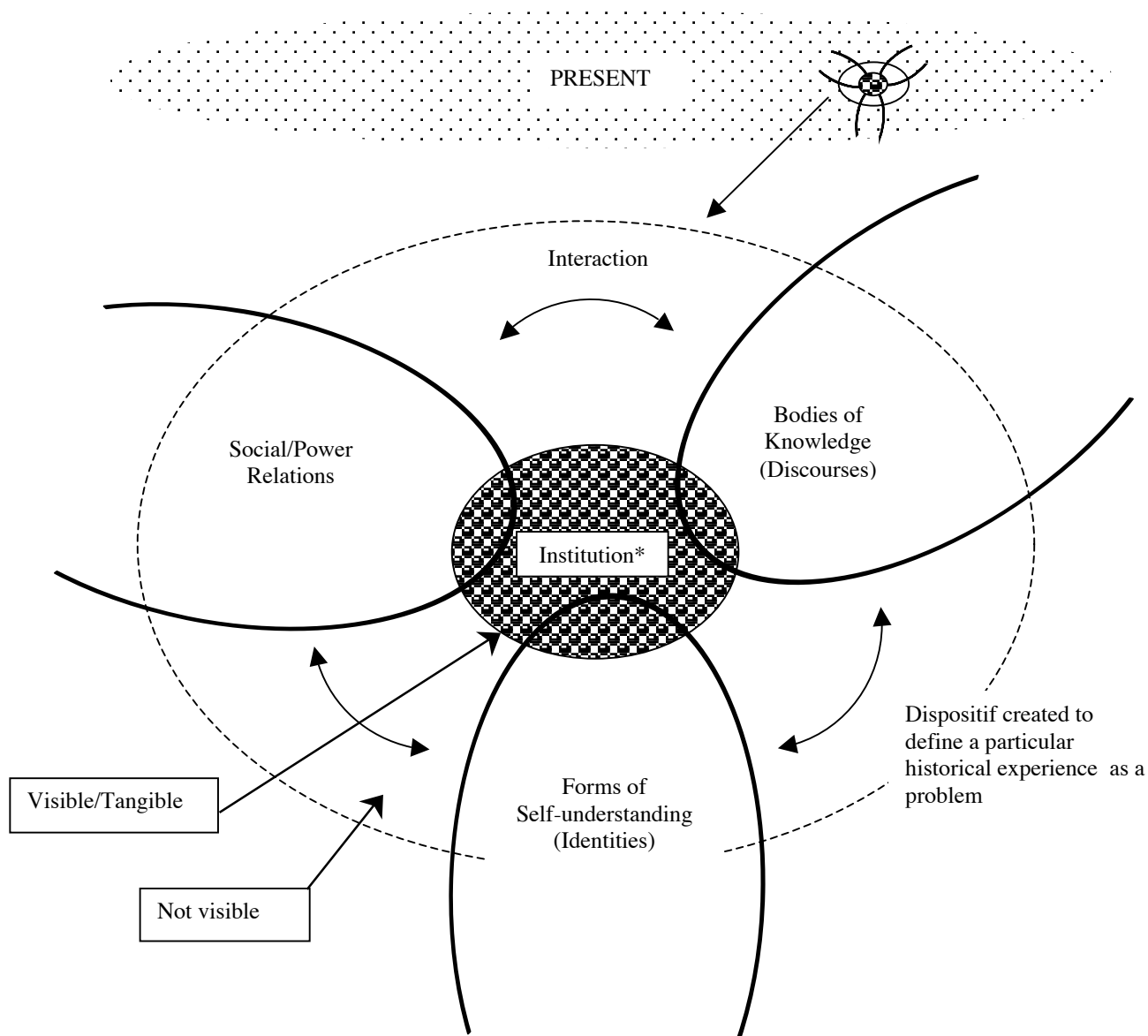
As explained earlier, a space of experience is constituted by the interplay between social/power relations, relations mediated by a bodies of knowledge, and relations of self-recognition/identity. As a consequence, to assume that a particular domain of experience is currently presented as a problem, and then to research this in a Foucaultian manner, means to attempt to understand it by asking the questions first posed above:

How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge?, How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations?, How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?
(Foucault, 1984, p. 49)

In other words, how we have been constituted as subjects of a body of knowledge that makes explicit reference to a domain of our present experience; how we have been constituted as subjects that exercise or submit to certain social/power relations that are immanent in that domain of experience; and finally, how we have constituted ourselves so that we can morally recognise ourselves in actions that are proper to that domain of experience.

This kind of investigation is intrinsically critical and systemic. It constitutes an attempt to unearth a historical development that can help us to understand how we became what we are. In other words, this kind of investigation is not looking for the limits of what is possible, but rather it is an interpretation of how our limits have been, and still remain, possible.

Figure 1 The Dispositif.



*Constitutes part of the answer given to a particular problematisation. Multiple problematisations and institutions are simultaneously created and modified at any particular historical moment.

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