

AN INCURSION INTO THE MICROPHYSICS
OF POWER – A FEW *OPTION INDICATIONS*

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Abstract. The incursion – which this article proposes – into the microphysics of power as indicated by Michel Foucault, capitalizes on a double roadmap. The first is concerned with highlighting the method practiced by Foucault when analysing the mechanisms of power – a philosophical report and an imperative discourse, both capable of answering the Deleuz-ian question “what does accomplish the microphysics of power mean for Foucault”? The second resorts to Foucault’s original reference to the microphysics of power, by articulating an implicit model of power found in and through the dissemination of micro-powers.

Keywords: *Michel Foucault; Micro-politics; Microphysics of the Power; Micropower(s)*

Power Comes from Everywhere – Some Introductory-Contextual Notes

The approach-incursion into the microphysics of power aims to (re)assemble the *nodal* perspectives issued by Michel Foucault in the very *detente* of (de)composing the mechanisms of power, starting from a guid(ing) axiom for the entire named path – more than *anonymous and impersonal*, disposed in an *omnipresent and all-encompassing* way, power functions as a mechanics capable of germinating – multiplying(ly) – power relations, tensively loading a conceptual non-limited double: *power creates a continuum of knowledge, and knowledge – in its turn – produces power effects*. Separating from the action assumptions that (over)perceived in/through power either an *institution*, a *structure*, or an *ability*, all of them localized-localizable, the filter that Foucault applies is one of non-positioning – *power comes from everywhere* – and of considering the reality of the concept as having the valences of a *complex situational-strategic act*, part of a given society. If the angle of analysis is an innovative one, the tradition to which Foucault remains willingly tributary, up to a point, is one of positioning inside the very structural defence of power, in a Nietzschean¹ manner, on the one hand; and on the other hand, of offering a counterweight to the *macro* physical-

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¹The *genealogy of power* – a concept imported on the connection opened by Fr. Nietzsche – is meant to clarify and investigate the political, philosophical and social brands of European modernity, in the sense in

Marxist² approach of frontal clashes between/from homogeneous/opposite forces, centrally capitalizing on the dependence of state *macro*-mechanisms on social *micro*-mechanisms, in the sense that the state is a superstructural construct in relation to power devices/ networks that travel through extended spaces via *the body – sexuality – family – attitudes – knowledge*. It is precisely in this open range that Michel Foucault places the accumulation of power microfragments as *moving and transient points/nodes/foci*.

Gianfranco Tomei and Ivan De Santis³ highlight the method by which M. Foucault's investigative manner initially left the impression of a *project thought as a reaction to another project* (the expression/codification of relations and power relations) in order to subsequently relate from outside the project, from the very nomadic space of the “fight against power”, to/in *the place* where reactions “developed after taking over power in order to oppose it” can be quantified⁴. For Robert S. Leib⁵, even if M. Foucault's project requires connection to an extended theoretical *detente*⁶, the concepts instrumentally used by the latter refer to the institutional power relations themselves seen as foundations of the study of *microphysics*, which brings together a combination of “tactics, manoeuvres, techniques and functions arranged between the individualized body, the person, the self, the institution, the apparatus and the norm, and which play various roles in production, facilitation and mutual limitation. In the microphysical field, power relations exist in a multifocused state, in a struggle with countless other points of confrontation⁷.”

which the cognitive processes of knowledge accompany the exercise of social domination. The perspective also allows a set of similarities between the Foucaultian theory of *the genealogy of power* and the *critique of social theory* (advanced by Horkheimer in the 1930s and later reactivated by Jürgen Habermas) – see, in this sense, Viorella Manolache, Axel Honneth, *Kritik der Macht. Reflexionsstufen einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/M., 1986, in Cristian-Ion Popa (coord.), *Enciclopedia operelor fundamentale ale filosofiei politice actuale. Contemporanii: 1971-1989*, Editura Institutului de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale “Ion I. C. Brătianu” Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015, pp. 392-394.

² Foucault's postulates consider the assertion that *power is not a substance*, but targets a particular type of relationships between individuals, with the distinctive feature that certain people can determine, more or less (concretely or fragmentarily), the behaviour of other people. This is the situation in which *governance assumes a certain form of rationality, not an instrumental violence*, on the grounds that *the state – either individual(izing) or total(izing) – was and remains one of the most remarkable and feared forms of human government*. The development of *critical theory* will place Michel Foucault in opposition to the Marxist precepts prevalent in post-war France – *Ibidem*.

³ Gianfranco Tomei, Ivan De Santis, “Microphysics of Power: Michel Foucault and Biopolitics”, in *Rivista di Psichiatria e Psicoterapia Culturale*, Vol. X, no. 1, December 2022, available at <http://www.psiculturale.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Microphysics-of-power.-Michel-Foucault-and-bio-politics-Tomei-e-De-Santis-2022.pdf>, accessed at 15 August 2024.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Robert S. Leib, “Goffman and Foucault: Framing the Microphysics of Power”, in Michael Jacobsen (ed.) *The International Handbook of Goffman Studies*, Routledge, 2022, pp. 349-360.

⁶ Robert S. Leib brings together, in a complementary theoretical and practical equation, Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault, contemporaries in terms of “career chronology, academic interests and life span”, in an interrelation positioned as a *systemic caput – Foucault – at the top, Goffman – at the bottom*. Foucault, believes Robert S. Leib, *micro* thinks about the problems Goffman questions at the *macro* level: “Goffman and Foucault take over power in order to consider it a polarizing mode, distributed in social spaces, but neither understands power in the Weberian sense of domination (Herrschaft) – (...) Power designates a flow or strategy rather than a possession (...)” – *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

*Five Sentences on the Analysis of Power Mechanisms:
An Imperative Philosophy and Discourse*

In the opening of the Course of January 11, 1978⁸, Michel Foucault issued, warning(ly) targeting the accumulation of exegetical statements to follow, five punctual sentences intended to clarify the approach applied to the analysis of the mechanisms of power. The precaution is justified and explicit – the sentences released are not and will not be organized following the precept of construction of principles, rules or theorems, but are equivalent – in the structural node of biopolitics – to *indications of option*⁹.

The approach operated by Foucault is neither general(ising), nor partial-particular, but takes into account the pivots of identification and quantification of power, the place through which it passes and travels, its happening act, the parts between which and which it co-involves, the points between which it takes place, the processes and the manifest effects – all these structures outlining a perspective that confirms its status as *the beginning of a theory* – not of what power is, but of power itself, accrediting it with all the meanings of “a set of mechanisms and procedures that have as role or function and theme (...) to ensure power. It is a set of procedures (...), the analysis of power mechanisms priming something akin to a theory of power”.¹⁰

A second sentence states that “power is not based on itself and is not given on its own”¹¹, the mechanisms of power being inserted circularly, equating the cause and effect of the sum of possible-existing relationships (production, family, sexual, etc.).

A third sentence establishes that Foucault *does philosophy*, in the sense of a politics of truth interested in showing the effects of knowledge produced by struggles, confrontations, clashes and power tactics.

The fourth propositional arrangement (over)sees in the mentioned approach the existence and archiving of an imperative discourse, in the sense of its positioning inside the flow of existence of the *tactical identifiers* it envisages.

The fifth sentence reevaluates the philosophical fight-truth ratio, a dimension that Foucault applies to the categorical and unconditional imperative, that of never engaging in politics¹².

The aforementioned perspectives also involve a *plus-set* of three additional clarifications.

The first concerns the exemplary appeal to the concentrated perspectives of Richard A. Lynch¹³ who slides, in his quantification of Foucault’s approach, between broad project – vision – point of view – theory, establishing that the

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Securitate, teritoriu, populatie* [*Security, Territory, Population*], Idea Design & Print Publishing House, Cluj, 2009.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *quoted work*, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹³ Richard A. Lynch, “Foucault’s theory of power”, in Dianna Taylor (ed.), *Michel Foucault. Key Concepts*, Acumen, 2011, pp. 13-27.

analytical level involved is both empirical and theoretical, disposed on the levels of identifying modern forms of power – *disciplinary power* and *biopower* – and/or pre-modern – *sovereign power* – and considering that Foucault issues a theory of power only in/through analyses articulated in the mid-1970s (dedicated to psychiatry, prison or sexuality), while still mentioning all necessary caution to be taken when the approach is labelled as theory, and not abandoning – *albeit experimentally!* – this precise form of identification: “*Foucault’s theory of power* (we note) suggests that power is ubiquitous, that is, power can be found in all social interactions.”¹⁴ When deciding that Foucault’s analysis is *a specific point of view*, Richard A. Lynch resorts to a decisive sentence: “First and foremost, power must be understood at the micro level of force relationships.”¹⁵

The second recovers what Foucault decreed through the discursive dimension of philosophy¹⁶, equating it to an act of diagnosing what exists, an approach – not by chance – engaged in other five pivot(ing) points, as functions found in/through *justification, interpretation, criticism, comment*, arranged in/through the articulation of the discursive prerogative of *justification* and *interpretation*. Foucault’s resistance, up to a point, to considering himself a philosopher, needs to be reconsidered by the very degree of reference he uses – “I am not *very philosophical*”¹⁷ (we note) – and the clarification “I am not a philosopher *in the classical sense of the term*”¹⁸ (we note). Foucault creates a philosophy of power, in the very sense of deepening the processes, movements, forces (here – powers), which he diagnoses.

The third one takes into account the categorical and unconditional imperative of never doing politics, which both Daniel Defert¹⁹ and Alan D. Schrift²⁰ place under the sign of the *microphysics* of power, in the sense of a continued approach [Einaudi will publish *Microfisica del potere*, translated into Brazilian and German with the title *Dispositive der Macht*, respectively *Power, Truth, Strategy* (Sydney, 1979) and *Power/Knowledge* (New York, 1980), *political texts* which exerted their influence on the *political reception* of Foucault’s work)]²¹ while offering a new/different way of thinking about power; (separate from the schematic-Marxist perspective, in Foucault’s view obedience is not only the result of applying the instruments of violence and ideology; the *microphysics* of power subtly disciplines the physical body, in the hypostasis of strategy or point of tension, with specific action at all levels of *socius*)²². Alan D. Schrift

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discursul filosofic [The Philosophical Discourse]*, Trei Publishing House, Bucharest, 2024.

¹⁷ *Idem*, “Philosophie et psychologie” (entretien avec A. Badiou), in *Dossiers Pédagogiques de la radio-télévision scolaire*, 27 février 1965, pp. 65-71.

¹⁸ *Idem*, “Folie, littérature, société” (1970), in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988*, tome II, 1970-1975, Gallimard, Paris, 1994.

¹⁹ Daniel Defert, “Chronology”, in Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary, Jana Sawicki (eds.), *A Companion to Foucault*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 11-84.

²⁰ Alan D. Schrift, “Discipline and Punish”, in Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary, Jana Sawicki (eds.), *quoted work*, pp. 137-154.

²¹ Daniel Defert, *quoted work*, p. 64.

²² Alan D. Schrift, *quoted work*, pp. 140-141.

centralises the Foucaultian statement of direct co-engagement of power and knowledge, considering that “rethinking power as the *political anatomy* of the *political body* (we underline) requires the abandonment of the following traditional ways of thinking about power (many of which are the privileged categories of Marxist analysis): the violence-ideology opposition; the metaphor of property; the models of contract or conquest; the opposition between interested and disinterested knowledge; and the primacy of the subject. Letting go of these assumptions allows rethinking the politics of the body (...)”.²³

*What Does Accomplish the Microphysics
of Power Mean for Foucault?*

G. Deleuze interpretively articulates a set of postulates, between which he individualizes Foucault’s original reference to the *microphysics* of power, by (over)grasping the interpretation of *macro* that Deleuze places – contextually and semantico-technically – in relation to the *molar* significance, equating Foucault’s approach to an act of announcing/building a *molecular conception of power*. The applied logic is one of oppositions, positioned inside *the rule of versus*, in the sense that if “large entities are organized after molar oppositions (...), postulated, infrastructure-superstructure, dominated-domination, class oppositions, etc.”²⁴, then the molecular decisively involves a set of complementarities, recognized in/through the *macroscopic dimension* vs. *the practically microscopic dimension*. Deleuze also co-involves the *macro – micro* difference, considering it one of the difficult points of Foucault’s theory, a report that transgresses the debate with/in a career concerned only with the implications of miniaturization or just with the big terms thought out/projected in small terms. The relationship is questioned by Deleuze for the very abstract-obscure nature it perpetuates, a benchmark of vital importance for a relat(ioning) type of mechanics, relevant and decisive through/by avoiding a simplified-extended miniaturization, a method that Deleuze himself will use when resorting to a set of clarifying-interpretative levels.

The first envisages the valorisation of the question “*what does accomplish the microphysics of power mean for Foucault?*” and “(...) what is to be discovered underneath, under the macroscopic body and under the molar²⁵ opposition”, through the interest offered to the transition from “molar opposition to molecular complementarity, from macro-entity to differential²⁶ relationship”, avoiding the deviat(ing) miniaturization synonyms, up to the very endeavour of replacing the law of typical molecular complementarity with another extended concept, in the sense that “for the great law of opposition-illegality, we must substitute a fine complementarity, a law-illegalism micro-complementarity”²⁷. Foucault – Deleuze

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ The Deleuze Seminars, *Foucault/10*, January, 14, 1986, available at <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/lecture/lecture-10/>, accessed at 1 July 2024.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

believes – resorts to *microphysics* when he states that – at the same microphysical level – the law does not oppose illegality, in the sense that “in the *macro*, the law is made to prohibit, and in the *micro*, it is not made to prohibit, but to do something else”²⁸. The perspective becomes a punctual one for Deleuze: “...(...) from the perspective of a microphysics of law, the law is inseparable from its enforcement decrees, from its cases of interpretation. There is no law that does not give rise to the problem of interpretation. We will call the interpretation of the law *jurisprudence*. It may be that, from a macrophysical point of view, the law can be conceived independently of the jurisprudence. It goes without saying that, from a microphysical point of view, law is inseparable from jurisprudence”²⁹.

The second refers to what Foucault (re)names by equating the power relationship with the relationship of forces, with Deleuze operating a rewrite through a double connotation – in the singular and in the plural – insisting that “power is relational, and the power relationship is a relationship of forces. (...) Power is not an attribute. It is a molar attribute; it is a molecular relationship. (...) Power is not a form. And the power relationship is not a relationship between forms. There is definitely a form of ‘State’. (...) The microphysics of power penetrates under the great body that is the State. In other words, power is informal. It does not go through a form, and the power relationship is not a relationship between forms. This interests us very much: a relationship of forces means something other than a relationship of forms”³⁰. Decreeing that *microphysics* represents *the relationship between force and force*, Deleuze resorts to oppositional tools – stratified *vs.* strategic – insisting that power is strategic, holding only molar layers, formless, guided by the reason of handling multiplicities, referring to unformed materials and informal functions.

The third concerns Deleuze’s direct appeal to Foucault, either by highlighting – very quickly! – those milestones that consider – “very, very quickly”, says Deleuze – the prevalence of *micro-*; or by equating the Foucaultian approach to a philosophical construct, valuing what is *improbable* and *unexpected*. Deleuze insists on the rapid pace with which Foucault acknowledges that “micro- does not consider a difference in size, but a difference in nature. (...) Take the microphysical sentence: power is a relationship that passes on the path of the dominated no less than on the path of the dominant. (...) *Dominant* and *dominated* change when they pass from macro to micro, when they go from macrophysical to microphysical”³¹, considering with added relevance the analogy with physics (there are no equivalent terms in *microphysics* and in *macrophysics*), sliding, in fact, from “everyone already knows what Foucault teaches you” to “everyone knows. But no one used this knowledge in the way Foucault did.”³²

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ *Ibidem.*

³² *Ibidem.*

The verdict is supported by a double note-taking: not only does Foucault not rush to offer interpretations when he resorts to the meaning of *micro-*, but he does it position(ingly) in the *History of Sexuality*, and detailed, as an analogy, in *Words and Things*. In a Foucaultian manner, the overall strategy and its series of successive links are the structures that make possible the integrated operation of the “local outbreaks” and the “transformation schemes”, their overall effects assuming “exact and subtle relationships”, with “the role of support and anchoring point”: “There are no discontinuities between these, as if they were two different levels (one microscopic and the other macroscopic); but no homogeneity either (as if one were only the enlarged projection or miniaturization of the other); rather we have to think about the double conditioning of a strategy by virtue of the specificity of possible tactics, by the effect of the strategic envelope that makes them work”³³. By reference to sex as the object of political conflicts, Foucault (de)nominates “the entire micro-power exerted on the body”³⁴, culminating in “the *eugenic* – (we underline) expansion and growth of micro-powers, under the cover of unlimited *etatization*”³⁵. Using analogy, Foucault believes that “although the distance from the microcosm to the macrocosm may be huge, it is not infinite”³⁶; at the archaeological level, the knowledge of the 16th century values the relations between the macrocosm and the *microcosm* as a simple surface effect, a relationship considered “indispensable for stopping the endless oscillation of resemblance and sign”³⁷. What Deleuze considers an absolute originality of the Foucaultian approach consists in the way of individualizing the power/subjects inside the corpus of pastoral power, decreeing that “each social formation refers to a diagram or diagrams for the simple reason... that all diagrams are unstable and fluid, while social formations are in relative balance”³⁸.

*Instead of Conclusions; a Society that Does not Refer
to Some Microphysics of Power Does not Exist*

Michel Foucault clarifies the way in which focusing on *micro-*powers that are exercised at the level of everyday life does not imply ignoring the state apparatus, in the sense that the latter remains one of *plus relevance*³⁹. The perspective also envisages the articulation of an implicit model of power, found in and through the dissemination of *micro-*powers, “a dispersed network of devices without a single organizational system, a centre or a nodal point, a cross-cutting

³³ Michel Foucault, *Istoria sexualității*. Vol. 1, *Voința de a ști [History of Sexuality, The Will to Knowledge]*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 95.

³⁴ See sex as the object of the body disciplines, sexuality as the theme/indication of “political energy” and “biological vigor”, but also the registers – organization, control, supervision – measures, estimates, interventions – *Ibidem*, pp. 136-137.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *Cuvintele și lucrurile [Words and Things]*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ The Deleuze Seminars, *quoted work*.

³⁹ Colin Gordon (ed.), *Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, pp. 59-60.

coordination of institutions and disparate technologies”⁴⁰. The above-mentioned approach emphasizes an avoidance of the schematic that constrains the location of power within the state apparatus⁴¹, in the sense that “the exercise of power goes much further, passes through finer channels and is much more ambiguous, each individual having at his disposal a certain power; and it is precisely for this reason that one can also act as a vehicle for the transmission of a wider power. Reproduction of production ratios is not the only function served by power. Domination systems and exploitation circuits interact, intersect and support each other, but they do not coincide”⁴². The *micro*-mechanisms of power can be identified in the accumulation of exclusion measures, in surveillance devices, in the medicalization of sexuality, insanity, delinquency, all of which have become mechanisms incorporated in the social ensemble.

Paul Rabinow⁴³ insists on an accumulation of punctual evidence, meant to emphasize that the study of the *microphysics* of power co-involves its reception with the status (not of exercised ownership, but) of strategy, through dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics or techniques meant to perpetuate constant tensions/clashes, in counterbalance to any act of privilege or any contractual modality capable of regulating tension situations. From this position, power “becomes exercised rather than held; it is not some privilege acquired or preserved, belonging to the ruling class, but the overall effect of strategic positions – an effect that manifests itself broadly in relation to the position of those who are dominated. Moreover, this power is not simply exercised as an obligation or a prohibition; it is invested, transmitted (...)”⁴⁴

Deductively, the above-mentioned relational modalities cannot be restricted only to relations between the state and the citizens, or to class tensions, guided not by the *ana-* or *omo-*logical register, but by the very specificity manifested by a mechanism marked by various points of confrontation and *foci* of instability, each with its risks of conflict, frontality and reversal of established power relations. Hence the validation of the Deleuzian verdict that *a society that does not refer to some microphysics of power does not exist*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

⁴¹ Although Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary power includes elements justifying the fact that it would coincide with the development of the capitalist mode of production, an essential difference between Foucault and Marx persists and is recognized not only in two types of competing philosophies of history – one of different power formations and another of the capitalist mode of production itself – but, rather, in the understanding of the materiality of power. The intersection node consists in articulating the transversality and heterogeneity of power – see in this sense, Jason Read, *The micro-politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2003.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁴³ Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1984.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 174.

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