



PRESENTATION

ABOUT POWER, AUTHORITY AND SUBJECTION

Power produces subjects, it would be a way to enunciate one of the Foucauldian theses that open a critical horizon beyond the scheme of sovereignty, which Judith Butler accurately describes when she says “we are accustomed to conceive power as something that exerts pressure on the subject from the outside, something that subordinates, underrates and relegates to a lower order” (2010, p.12). The representation of power as an external force that imposes itself, as repression on the part of a group, an individual or the State, moves, in the Foucauldian analytic, towards a theory of subjection, in the double sense of this term, as submission and as subjectivation (Álvarez, 2015, Butler, 2010). Thus, the central problem for Foucault would not be the origin, nature or legitimation of power but its exercise on others, the particular question posed by Foucault is, precisely, “what happens when individuals exercise, as they say, their power over others?” (Álvarez, 2015, p. 329). For Foucault the answer to this question is not evident nor immediate, because the appearance in the sixteenth century of the State in the Western world (Álvarez, 2015) was configured as a cause of the widespread conception of power invested to subdue. Now, distant is the French philosopher of ignoring the importance of these analyzes, nonetheless, his reflection points to the constitution of the subject as who exercises and on which power is exercised and, therefore, the strategies used to it. In an interview with P. Boncennes in 1978, Foucault states the following

I do not think that this question “who exerts power?” can be answered unless the question “how does it happen?” is answered at the same time. Of course, we have to show who the responsible ones are, we know that we have to resort to, let's say, deputies, ministers, prominent private secretaries, etc. But this is not the important issue, because we know perfectly well that even if we were to designate exactly all those people, all those decision-makers, we still would not really know why and how the decision is made, how it becomes accepted by all, and how it harms a particular category of people, etc. (Álvarez, 2015, p. 92).

This is an interesting way to state the issue, since it is common to ask who exercises power, furthermore if who assumes power actually exercises it or if he, himself, is not subdue to another whose power is instituted with more severity, force or legitimacy. The Foucauldian theses on power are based, in part, on a particular observation: human beings are inevitably constituted in the midst of a complex framework of discipline and forms of training, which in one way or another has been enhanced by the creation of spaces of confinement in more or less recent dates in the history of the Western world, since according to Foucault, the disciplining of societies is more systematically evidenced since the eighteenth century. However, his examination of forms of training led him to the analysis of power relations rather than to an explanation of power as a foundation or essence, hence the question posed by the French author of *what happens when*

individuals exert their power over others? is revealed as a sense that points, precisely, to the understanding of power in its act dimension. The reflection on power does not lose its value when it is considered as a renunciation of freedom in which a right is transferred to a delegate by means of consent, for example, rather a theoretical-practical field is opened that conceives relationships between subjects that act, and not only between poles of activity and passivity, violence and resistance. Specifically for Foucault, power relations operate “on the field of possibility where the behavior of acting subjects comes to be inscribed; incites, induces, facilitates or makes more difficult, expands or limits, becomes more or less probable; in the extreme, it absolutely obliges or prevents” (Álvarez, 2015, p.334). In this regards, in Foucault, the power in its relations will have to be thought from the scope of what he calls government, in the sense of the leadership of others, and not only in the struggle, violence or voluntary resignation.

The question, *what happens when individuals exert their power over others?*, triggers a reflection on the relations of power that we intertwine daily, since, in Foucault, the governing of others would not be exclusive of those that could be considered power elites, due to the forms of indoctrinating are over time reproduced in institutions and remain there, surely without distinction of hierarchy among individuals. This aspect of the power described by Foucault allows, also, an ethical pondering on these relationships, in a wider order than the one that concerns only to the current ruler, with those who have or feel subordinated to him. Here I refer to an ethical reflection in the sense that this production of subjectivity, addressed by Foucault, would involve each individual in scenarios in which we assume that power is not being exercised or that we believe the code or regulation of an institution is only being applied, in both cases we are deceived by the idea, taken unilaterally, of power considered only as sovereignty. Thus, this production of subjectivity would have its place in the sphere of individual relationships, in the face-to-face interaction with others and it would remind us that relations are carried out bilaterally. The Gadamerian notion of authority is a good example of this, specifically when the German philosopher reflects on this matter “in the practical experience of life” (Gadamer, 2002, p. 61). In his analysis Gadamer implies how the prescription that delimits fantasy, typical of a socially institutionalized world, and the prevalence of certain models “that leave their print on us” (Gadamer, 2002, p. 62) for their ability to go beyond our own discourse and leave open a field of new possibilities for us, operate in parallel. According to Gadamer, this last sense of authority reveals its productive character -concept that should be understood as that that mobilizes, puts into tension, intensifies (Jullien, 2009)–whenever authority distances from authoritarianism, which appeals to the formula: “*something must be done in a certain way because it has always been done like that, it is necessary to adjust to the inveterate way of doing things*”, as if that way of doing things disregarded any history, only the pressing vision of the present of whom by such formula is oriented prevails. Authority, from a Gadamerian perspective, seems to be as such because it stimulates fantasy, because instead of being imposed, it is granted. Somebody is summoned up with autho-


rity, that is, authority would not be the product of a relationship of obedience but of an act of acknowledgment. This way, who fails at creating this relationship of authority will have to appeal to different imposition strategies -subtle, symbolic, tangible- that seem to bestow what he lacks.

For Gadamer, authority is linked to knowledge since, according to the German philosopher, it is difficult to grant authority to what seems irrational, or in more measured words, unwarranted; meaning, who is authorized (Gadamer, 2001) does not need to resort to his own authority to be recognized as such; in this regards, Gadamer points out: "this is evident in the sense that, for various reasons, it cannot be actually stated, how authority is acquired" (2001, p.135); on the contrary, the desire to exercise power in an authoritarian manner without any approval is unmistakable. This matter is evident in institutions that, by their regulations or forms of constitution, do not regularly consider participatory strategies of sovereignty, which up to certain point is understood as a way of ruling over and among individuals that foster the detriment of the majority, and thus in this singular production of subjectivities, the subjects reproduce those forms of privileged participation in regimes in which what has not been recognized but only imposed is taken for granted. In this sense, Foucauldian reflection on relations of power helps counteract the idea that the subject is "passionately attached to his own subordination" (Butler, 2010, p.17), enunciated by produced subjects who still see themselves as if they were entirely constituted from their origin, and in their present they consider they entitle an authority that they do not really possess – again the Gadamerian perspective. Now, it is clear that as individuals belonging to institutions that contribute to the education field from different spheres, we have the task of considering the relationship authority-knowledge, since the relationships established by current knowledge systems produce singular, modeled and trained subjectivities, from which subjects who dangerously take knowledge by authority emerge, which means fostering the use of very limited and precise strategies as the only legitimate ways of obtaining their authority. In this matter, the reflection provided by the human sciences is essential, whether their practices, discourses or scientific products take -or not- into account this path to reflect on power or its relationships. However, it is productive (considering the sense that Jullien gives to the concept) to not dismiss this perspective of the historical production of subjectivity as a way to stop and think about our commitment in the actions we exert over others.

Lina Marcela Cadavid Ramírez PhD (c)

Director/Editor

Colombian Journal of Social Sciences

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4537-1564>

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