

# THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

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# POWER/KNOWLEDGE/ RESISTANCE

## Foucault and epistemic injustice

*Amy Allen*

Michel Foucault could well be considered a theorist of epistemic injustice *avant la lettre*. As Miranda Fricker makes clear in the introduction to her *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, the very notion of epistemic injustice turns on theorizing “reason’s entanglements with social power” (2007: 3). But this is precisely the central task of Foucault’s work, as he himself indicates in a 1982 interview, where he suggests that

the central issue of philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century has always been, still is, and will, I hope, remain the question: What is this Reason that we use? What are its historical effects? What are its limits, and what are its dangers? How can we exist as rational beings, fortunately committed to practicing a rationality that is unfortunately crisscrossed by intrinsic dangers?

(2000a: 358)

For Foucault, the dangers and historical effects of forms of rationality consist primarily in their entanglements with relations of social power, relations that subject individuals in both senses of the term: constitute them as subjects in and through their subjection to prevailing regimes of ‘power/knowledge’. Moreover, Foucault interrogates the entanglements of reason with social power while avoiding the kind of reductionism of reason to power that Fricker associates with postmodernism (2007: 2–4). As Foucault emphasizes, his aim is to offer a “rational critique of rationality” (1998: 441); such a project, far from equating rationality or knowledge with power, attempts to study their *relation* (1998: 455).

More specifically, three core features of Foucault’s work make his thought an important and productive resource for contemporary discussions of epistemic injustice. These include the following: first, his rich and complex theorization of power, which is one of the most influential analyses in contemporary philosophy and social and political theory. In particular, his account of the relationship between what we might call *constitutive power* and *agential power* helps to highlight the relationship between testimonial and hermeneutical injustices. Second, his specific analysis of power/knowledge regimes and how these shape what it means to be ‘within the true’ (*dans le vrai*) offers a richer picture of hermeneutical injustices than that provided by Fricker. Third, and finally, his conception of genealogy as a kind of counter-memory that articulates subjugated knowledges provides a compelling model of resistance to epistemic injustices. In what follows,

I take up each of these core features of Foucault's work in turn, with an eye toward showing how Foucault's work intersects productively with the central concerns of theorists of epistemic injustice.

### 1. Power: constitutive and agential

If the goal of theorizing epistemic injustice is to think through reason's entanglements with social power, then it makes sense to start by offering an account of social power.<sup>1</sup> Foucault is perhaps best known for his subtle and nuanced analysis of power, an analysis that combines a constitutive conception of power – that is, a conception of how power works to constitute subjects and tie them to their identities – with an agential conception – that is, a conception of how power is exercised by agents to constrain or act upon the actions of other agents. By theorizing the relationship between these two dimensions of power, Foucault offers important resources for understanding the relationship between testimonial and hermeneutical forms of epistemic injustice.

The classic statement of Foucault's constitutive conception of power is found in his *History of Sexuality*, volume 1. There he defines power as

the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.

(1978: 92–93)

In other words, power, for Foucault, is neither an institution nor a structure nor an innate capacity of individuals; rather, “it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (1978: 93).

Foucault then goes on to articulate five core features of this strategic model of power. First, power is not a metaphysical property possessed by individuals but rather exists only in and through its exercise (Foucault 1978: 94). Second, power is found not only in the sovereign or the state, but rather is spread throughout the social body; hence, when we study power, we should focus on the points where it becomes “capillary” (Foucault 2003: 27). Third, power comes from below, which is to say that it is generated in the myriad mobile force relations that are spread throughout the social body (Foucault 1978: 94). Thus, when we study power, we should not view it, at least not initially, as “a phenomenon of mass and homogeneous domination” (Foucault 2003: 29) or as a “binary and all-encompassing opposition between ruler and ruled” (Foucault 1978: 94). This is not to deny that wide-ranging, systematic relations of domination exist; indeed, Foucault sometimes uses the term ‘domination’ to capture such broad, structural asymmetries of power.<sup>2</sup> However, he does insist that systematic relations of domination are best understood not as the *causes* but as the *results* of the power relations that are spread throughout the social body; thus, our analysis of power should be ascending rather than descending (Foucault 2003: 30). Fourth, power relations are “intentional and non-subjective” (Foucault 1978: 94). By intentional, Foucault means that power relations have a point or an aim, that they are directed toward a certain end; by non-subjective, he means that they are neither possessed nor controlled by individual subjects. Thus, rather than attempting to discern the intentions of the one who

'has' power, an attempt that would lead us "into a labyrinth from which there is no way out," we should investigate "the multiple peripheral bodies, the bodies that are constituted as subjects by power-effects" (Foucault 2003: 28–29). In other words, rather than viewing power as subjective – as possessed by a subject – we should view the subject as constituted by power relations. Fifth, and finally, "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 1978: 95), and resistance is always internal to power relations.<sup>3</sup>

As far as Foucault's constitutive conception of power goes, the crucial points are the following: power is not a capacity of agents but rather a mobile set of force relations spread throughout the social body that exist only in their exercise and that constitute agents as subjects. Although this constitutive conception has often been taken by Foucault's critics to deny the possibility of subjectivity or agency, and thus to undermine an agential understanding of power, this is a misunderstanding of Foucault's work.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Foucault articulates an agential understanding of power in his late essay, "The Subject and Power." There, he defines power as "a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action" (2000b: 341). According to his agential conception, power is "exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are 'free'. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available" (2000b: 342).

What ties these two apparently conflicting conceptions of power together is Foucault's account of subjection (*assujettissement*). Whereas classical, juridical conceptions of power in political philosophy presuppose "an individual who is naturally endowed . . . with rights, capabilities, and so on" (Foucault 2003: 43) and then ask under what circumstances it is legitimate for such a subject to be subjugated by the state, Foucault, by contrast, begins "with the power relationship itself, with the actual or effective relationship of domination . . . We should not, therefore, be asking subjects how, why, and by what right they can agree to being subjugated, but showing how actual relations of subjugation manufacture subjects" (2003: 45). The aim of this analysis is to uncover the "immense labor to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce . . . men's subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word" (Foucault 1978: 60).

Foucault's analysis of power is a rich, subtle, and complex account that has proven to be tremendously productive for work in philosophy, the humanities, and the social sciences in the decades since his death. Given the centrality of the concept of social power to the study of epistemic injustice, this fact alone makes his work a potentially productive resource. But more specifically, Foucault's understanding of power as spread throughout the social body through multiple forms of constraint and modes of interaction harmonizes well with the kind of holistic analysis of epistemic injustices as temporally and socially extended called for by José Medina in his critique of Miranda Fricker's account of testimonial injustice (Medina 2013: 58–60). Indeed, one of the central virtues of Foucault's analysis of power is that it is attentive to "complex histories and chains of social interactions that go beyond particular pairs and clusters of subjects" and that it provides "a sociohistorical analysis that contextualizes and connects sustained chains of interactions" (Medina 2013: 60). Moreover, by highlighting the relationship between the constitutive and agential dimensions of power through his account of subjection, Foucault offers a model for thinking through the complex relationships between episodic and agent-centered instances of testimonial injustice and the systemic, constitutive relations of hermeneutical injustice that, for Foucault, provide the former's condition of possibility. This allows not only for a more complex and dynamic conception of testimonial injustice, but also for a more complex and dynamic understanding of the relationship between testimonial and hermeneutic injustice.

## 2. Power/knowledge

Not only does Foucault offer a rich and subtle analysis of social power in its own right, he is also justly famous for his conceptualization of the entanglements of social power with knowledge, truth, and rationality. Indeed, in *Society Must be Defended*, which offers a classic statement of his conception of power/knowledge, Foucault indicates that his aim is to study the ‘how’ of power, which means studying the triangle of power, right, and truth. But unlike traditional political philosophy, which asks how the discourse of truth sets limits to the legitimate exercise of power (i.e., the right of power), Foucault seeks to invert this question to ask the following questions: “What are the rules of right that power implements to produce discourses of truth” (2003: 24)? In other words, what are power’s “truth-effects” (2003: 25)?

What this means concretely is that in our society the multiple and mobile relations of power that traverse the social body are “indissociable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work. Power cannot be exercised unless a certain economy of discourses of truth functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power” (Foucault 2003: 24). For example, individuals are compelled to discover the truth or tell the truth about themselves; “we are judged, condemned, forced to perform tasks, and destined to live and die in certain ways by discourses that are true, and which bring with them specific power-effects” (Foucault 2003: 25).

On the basis of this conception of power/knowledge, Foucault offers the following conception of truth:

Truth isn’t outside power or lacking in power . . . Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

(2000c: 131)

According to this analysis, each society would thus have its own distinctive political economy of truth, its own discursive means for determining the political, power-laden conditions of possibility for forming true statements, for being, as Foucault once put it, “*dans le vrai* (within the true)” (1972: 224). For Foucault, the political economy of truth in our society is characterized by two features. The first is the dominance of scientific discourses and institutions in the disciplinary production of the conditions of possibility for truth. The second is the diffusion of the political economy of truth throughout the social body through the operation of educational and informational apparatuses such as the university, the media, and so forth (Foucault 2000c: 131). (Moreover, in late modernity, these two features are closely intertwined, since the educational system is increasingly dominated by scientific discourses.) The goal of analyzing this political economy of truth, however, is not that of “emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time” (Foucault 2000c: 133). The refusal of the attempt to emancipate truth from power is what distinguishes Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge from classical forms of ideology critique.<sup>5</sup>

This refusal carries over to his methodological distinction between genealogy and the history of science. Whereas the latter operates on what Foucault calls “the cognition-truth axis,”

the former remains within what he calls the “discourse–power axis” (2000c: 178). Thus when we want to examine, for example, 18th century Europe from a genealogical point of view, this requires that we must reject or at least bracket the ideas of “the progress of the enlightenment, the struggle of knowledge against ignorance, of reason against chimeras, of experience against prejudices, of reason against error, and so on” and instead analyze the Enlightenment period as “an immense and multiple battle between knowledges in the plural – knowledges that are in conflict because of their very morphology, because they are in the possession of enemies, and because they have intrinsic power–effects” (Foucault 2000c: 178–179). As an example, Foucault discusses the homogenization, normalization, classification, and centralization of medical knowledge in the second half of the 18th century. This was accomplished through the creation of hospitals, pharmacies, medical societies that established professional codes, and public hygiene campaigns. In other words, the very same operations that Foucault analyzed in his account of disciplinary power – selection, normalization, hierarchization, and centralization – produce both normalized, disciplined subjects and disciplined knowledges.<sup>6</sup> The result of this process of disciplining knowledges was the creation of modern academic and professional disciplines. As Foucault puts it: “The eighteenth century was the century when knowledges were disciplined, or when, in other words, the internal organization of every knowledge became a discipline” (2003: 181). This disciplining of knowledge allowed for the eradication of false or nonknowledge, the homogenization and normalization of the content of knowledge, the centralization of knowledge around core axioms, and the hierarchization of different forms of knowledge production. This process was institutionalized through the emergence of the modern university, which played the role of selecting some knowledges and disqualifying others. The disciplining of knowledges replaced a power/knowledge regime that focused on sorting acceptable from unacceptable statements with one focused on a new problem: “Who is speaking, are they qualified to speak, at what level is the statement situated, what set can it be fitted into, and how and to what extent does it conform to other forms and other typologies of knowledge” (Foucault 2003: 184)? In other words, this process of the “disciplinarization of knowledges” that occurred in 18th century Europe “established a new mode of relationship between power and knowledge” (Foucault 2003: 184).

The goal of Foucault’s genealogical analysis of power/knowledge regimes, then, is to provide a “political history of knowledge” or a historical analysis of the “politics of truth” (Foucault 2000d: 13). Foucault’s genealogy of disciplines, sketched briefly above, where disciplines are understood as specific, historically emergent, contingent, and culturally specific forms of power/knowledge that set the limits of what can be within the true at a given time and thus serve both as enabling resources for the production of true statements and systems of control and constraint that fix the limits of discourses (Foucault 1972: 224), serves as an example of this kind of political history of knowledge. It also offers some reasons to think that Foucault’s conception of power/knowledge might allow for a broader conception of hermeneutical injustice than that provided in existing theories of epistemic injustice. Miranda Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as “the injustice of having some significant areas of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (Fricker 2007: 155). The central case that motivates this definition for Fricker is one in which a member of an oppressed group lacks the conceptual resources to make sense of her situation as a result of structural identity prejudice. An example of such an injustice would be a woman who experienced what we now call sexual harassment prior to the time when this was identified and named by feminists as a distinctive form of gender–based subordination. The harm of such hermeneutical injustice, for Fricker, is that it leaves the oppressed individual unable to make the harm that she has suffered intelligible to others or even to herself; thus, hermeneutical injustice can threaten the very development of the self (Fricker 2007: 163).

What Foucault's work offers is a richer and more complex conception of the intertwined discursive and institutional mechanisms by means of which collective hermeneutical resources are produced, codified, and organized into hierarchies. Foucault's genealogy of the emergence of disciplines in the 18th century provides a contextually and historically specific analysis of how particular knowledges are disqualified by being cast out of the domain of the true while others are organized into disciplines that are codified in social institutions such as the university, the media, and the educational system. Foucault's work also allows for a deeper understanding of the kind of structural epistemic injustice or identity prejudice that is at work in Fricker's central case of hermeneutical injustice. Foucault's genealogical analyses of power/knowledge regimes enable us to see how certain people are first classified into groups (the ill, the insane, the sexually deviant) and then disqualified as knowers by virtue of being members of such groups. These aspects of Foucault's work thus afford a more complex genealogical understanding of the distribution and dispersal of hermeneutical resources throughout societies such as ours, and of the role of academic disciplines in those patterns of distribution.

### 3. Power/knowledge/resistance

Recall Foucault's claim that where there is power, there is resistance. If we extend this claim about social power to his analysis of power/knowledge regimes, we get the corollary that where there is power/knowledge, there is epistemic resistance. Although Foucault is often criticized for failing to give a fully elaborated account of resistance, it is worth noting that one of his more developed discussions of resistance focuses on epistemic resistance and, specifically, on the relationship between genealogical method and epistemic resistance. This discussion thus provides an excellent vantage point on the resources that Foucault's work offers for theorizing resistance to epistemic injustice.

In the opening lecture of his "*Society Must be Defended*" course at the Collège de France, Foucault begins by characterizing his critiques of the prison, the asylum, and the clinic as forms of local critique that are made possible by the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" (2003: 7). By subjugated knowledges, Foucault means two things: first, the "blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked", and, second, knowledges "that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve. . . , hierarchically inferior knowledges. . . that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity" (2003: 7). The former understanding of subjugated knowledges refers to those forms of scholarly knowledge that have been marginalized or rendered inferior by the knowledge hierarchy imposed by disciplines; the latter meaning refers to those forms of knowledge that were disqualified *as* knowledge by the process of disciplinarization that I described in the previous section. As examples of the latter, Foucault offers the knowledge of the nurse, of the psychiatric patient, or of the delinquent. Genealogical analysis, as a kind of local critique, is made possible and given "its essential strength" by the "coupling together of the buried scholarly knowledge and knowledges that were disqualified by the hierarchy of erudition and sciences" (Foucault 2003: 8). At stake in the recovery of both forms of subjugated knowledges is a historical, genealogical knowledge of struggles, and an attempt to make use of that knowledge in the service of a critique of our historical present.

In this sense, genealogies are antisciences. This is not to say that genealogies reject knowledge and celebrate ignorance, nor even that they reject science *per se*; rather, they enact what Foucault calls "the insurrection of knowledges," (2003: 9) which means an insurrection that challenges the centralizing, normalizing, and hierarchizing features of disciplinary power/knowledge regimes. Such an insurrection does not amount to a straightforward rejection of science or scientific

knowledge. Rather, Foucault's aim is to show how the production of scientific knowledge is entangled with relations of power, to reveal scientific truth as a thing of this world. So, for example, when Foucault writes a historical critique of modern psychiatry, his aim is not to reject psychiatry but rather to understand its historical conditions of possibility and its entanglement with relations of power and exclusion (Foucault 2006). Thus, Foucault defines genealogy, the central method of the best known period of his work, as an "attempt to desubjugate historical knowledges, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse" (2003: 10). Genealogy is thus a form of counterhistory that disrupts and critiques existing, inherited, but contingent epistemic hierarchies.

As José Medina has argued convincingly, Foucault's conception of genealogy as the insurrection of subjugated knowledges provides a powerful model of resistance to epistemic injustice. As Medina puts it, "the critical goal of genealogy is to energize a vibrant and feisty epistemic pluralism so that insurrectionary struggles among competing power/knowledge frameworks are always underway and contestation always alive" (2011: 12). Although there is always the danger that such insurrections will consolidate into new forms of epistemic hegemony, Foucault's work also views the local critique fueled by the insurrection of subjugated knowledges as an ongoing, endless task. Thus, as Medina explains, it guarantees "the constant *epistemic friction* of knowledges from below, which . . . means guaranteeing that eccentric voices and perspectives are heard and can interact with mainstream ones, that the experiences and concerns of those who live in darkness and silence do not remain lost and unattended" (2011: 21).

Although some theorists of epistemic injustice, such as Fricker, have criticized Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge for dispensing too readily with the notion of truth (Fricker 2007: 55), Medina finds its radicality to be precisely its source of strength for an account of epistemic resistance. In Foucault's work, as Medina explains, "epistemic frictions are sought for their own sake, for the forms of *resistance* that they constitute" (2011: 24). Moreover, Medina argues that Foucault's radical, 'guerrilla pluralism' offers two crucial insights for theorizing the epistemology of ignorance, even though his work has not been widely embraced by theorists working on this topic. These insights are, first, the co-constitution of knowledge and ignorance within power/knowledge regimes and, second, the lack of availability of an epistemically innocent standpoint, that is, an epistemic standpoint outside of power relations (Medina 2011: 30–31). As Medina shows, these two Foucauldian insights are tremendously productive for the critique and resistance of racialized epistemologies of ignorance, insofar as they highlight "the co-constitutive relations between racial knowledge and racial ignorance, and the unavailability of innocent racialized standpoints" (Medina 2011: 31). As such, Foucault's understanding of genealogy as the insurrection of subjugated knowledges enables theorists of epistemic injustice to highlight "the constant epistemic struggles that take place in racialized social fields, calling attention to possibilities of resistance and contestation" (Medina 2011: 31).

#### 4. Conclusion

Medina notes that it is surprising that Foucault's work is not more widely cited and discussed in the literature on epistemologies of ignorance in feminist and critical race theory (2011: 29). He speculates that this could be explained by the long-standing but now largely outmoded opposition between standpoint theories and social constructivist theories. It is equally surprising that Foucault's work is not more widely cited and discussed in the literature on epistemic injustice. My best guess is that this can be explained by long-standing but also largely unproductive if not outmoded oppositions between analytic philosophy – from which the field of social

epistemology emerged – and continental philosophy. But if we assume, as Fricker does in her groundbreaking work, that our theorizing of epistemic injustice should start not by articulating norms of epistemic justice or non-oppressive rationality but rather by exploring the “negative space” of injustice as it inheres in actually existing social practices (Fricker 2007: viii), then there are profound substantive and methodological resources in the traditions of continental philosophy and critical theory for this kind of project. Theorists of epistemic injustice would do well to make use of them.

**Related chapters:** 9, 11, 12, 14, 37

## Notes

- 1 To be sure, one might just as well say that we should start by giving an account of reason, but Fricker starts with power because of her methodological commitment to non-ideal theory, a commitment that Foucault would most definitely share.
- 2 See, for example, Foucault 2000b: 331–332.
- 3 I discuss resistance in more detail in section three.
- 4 I argue against this misunderstanding of Foucault’s work in Allen 2008 chapter 2.
- 5 On this point, see also Foucault 2003: 33–34. By ‘classical forms of ideology critique,’ I have in mind those theorists in the Marxist tradition who presuppose the possibility of emancipating truth from power, at least in principle. As I read him, this would include not only Marx himself, but also critical theorists such as Habermas.
- 6 For Foucault’s account of how these mechanisms work in the disciplining of individual subjects, see Foucault 1977 part III.

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