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English 596

Biographical Presentation

**Michel Foucault: Rhetoric and Power**

*" My intention was not to deal with the problem of truth, but with the problem of truth-teller or truth-telling as an activity. By this I mean that, for me, it was not a question of analyzing the internal or external criteria that would enable the Greeks and Romans, or anyone else, to recognize whether a statement or proposition is true or not. At issue for me was rather the attempt to consider truth-telling as a specific activity, or as a role. "*

*- Concluding remarks by Foucault in Discourse and Truth*

I just want to start off with sort of disclaimer, Michel Foucault was a highly intellectual theorist who spoke on many different topics and systems of thought. This presentation will hope to illuminate some of his contributions as well as connect his work with a study of rhetoric. If there is a concept that is not understood at any point in time during this presentation, or if you have something to contribute for, feel free to ask, we will work it out and then move on.

So, now that I have pigeon holed myself, we can move forward with Michel’s demographical background and upbringing. Michel Foucault was born on October 15 1926 in Poitiers, France. He was a French philosopher, social theorist and historian who became one of the most influential and controversial scholars of the post-World War II period. He held a chair at the [Collège de France](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coll%C3%A8ge_de_France) with the title "History of Systems of Thought," and lectured at the [University at Buffalo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_at_Buffalo) and the [University of California, Berkeley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_California%2C_Berkeley). His best known works are *Discipline and Punish* and the multi-volume, but incomplete, *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault died of AIDS in June of 1984. He has worn many hats throughout his career: philosopher; historian; educator; etc. - I will hope to illuminate a few works in these endeavors by focusing on three elements: his relationship to rhetoric and reality; parrhesia and using rhetoric to distribute power.

Through his impressive career Foucault became known for his many demonstrative arguments that power depends not on material relations or authority but instead primarily on discursive networks. To have a working knowledge of Foucault's discursive formation and its meaning in the realm of knowledge is important to his work because of his multidisciplinary studies and teachings. Foucault is credited with “deconstruction of the subject,”, Foucault’s critique is a continuation of the structuralist project (of weakening the concept of agency). Michel Foucault has termed the discursive study of human beings as a ‘geneaology of the subject in Western Society”. This has led to questioning our power relations to our internal self’s.

In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault demonstrates that even such a basic human need as sexuality is socially constructed; there is no “pre-social” sex drive.

“Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power” (p. 106). Highlighting his discursivity in *The History of Sexuality* as being influenced by more than just subjectivities and social structures is similar to his treatment of rhetoric as a discursive subject. It is used by institutions or governments around us to distribute power. It is these power structures that society has formed what he believes to be the “distribution that we must reconstruct” because “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (100). But the human Being has not always been the unifying element at the center for the organization of knowledge. The current discursive formation, Modernity, locates human beings as the foundation and origin of knowledge through their supremacy over the use of language. Language has been made into an object which man controls. We have "invented man as a distinct self” Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish.*

**Uses of Parrhesia**

During Foucaults position at at the University of California at Berkeley, he delivered a series of speeches which were later published under the title, *Fearless speech*.

The expression "fearless speech" is a rough translation of the Greek term, *parrhesia*, which designates those who take a risk to tell the truth; the citizen who has the moral qualities required to speak the truth, even if it differs from what the majority of people believe and faces danger for speaking it. Having been titled as a historian of information after he published the *History of Sexuality* and *The Birth of the Clinic,* his work in Fearless speech carried on with the traditional tracing of concepts through a timeline with his analysis of *Parrhesia*. Displaying Foucault’s analysis of parrhesia will offer an example of one of the concepts developed in the field of rhetoric applied in Foucaultian style.

In [rhetoric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhetoric), parrhesia is a figure of speech described as speaking candidly or to ask forgiveness for so speaking. It implies not only freedom of speech, but the obligation to speak the truth for the common good, even at personal risk. [Foucault](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Foucault) developed the concept of parrhesia as a mode of [discourse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse) in which one speaks openly and truthfully about one's opinions and ideas without the use of rhetoric, manipulation, or generalization. In parrhesia, the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion. And he does this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks. Instead, the speaker uses the most direct words and forms of expression he can find. Whereas rhetoric, as Foucault would argue, provides the speaker with technical devices to help him prevail upon the minds of his audience.

 To position this term in relation to power distributed,: the parrhesiastes is always less powerful than the one with whom he or she speaks. The parrhesia comes from "below", as it were, and is directed towards "above". This is why an ancient Greek would not say that a teacher or father who criticizes a child uses parrhesia. But when a philosopher criticizes a tyrant, when a citizen criticizes the majority. In "democratic parrhesia" –where one speaks to the assembly. The speaker is coming from below his opponents.

I think that we can analyze this evolution from three points of view. (parrhesia and rhetoric, politics and philosophy)

### Parrhesia and Rhetoric

The first concerns the relationship of parrhesia to rhetoric – a relationship which is problematic even in Euripides. In the Socratic-Platonic tradition, parrhesia and rhetoric stand in a strong opposition; and this opposition appears very clearly in the Gorgias, for example, where the word "parrhesia" occurs. The continuous long speech is a rhetorical or sophistical device, whereas the dialogue through questions and answers is typical for parrhesia.

The opposition of parrhesia and rhetoric also runs through the *Phaedrus* when it is made apparent that Socrates is arguing for the Dialectic over writing or speeches is rhetorical devices – where, as you know, the main problem is not about the nature of the opposition between speech and writing, but concerns the difference between the logos which speaks the truth and the logos which is not capable of such truth-telling. The idea that personal conversations are the best vehicle for frank speaking and truth-telling insofar as one can dispense, in such conversations, with the need for rhetorical devices and ornamentation are what Foucault define as using parrhesia.

Foucault makes the case that one can also find some signs of the incorporation of parrhesia within the field of rhetoric in the work of rhetoricians at the beginning of the Roman Empire. In Quintillian's *Institutes of Oratory*, for example (Book IX, Chapter II), Quintillian explains that some rhetorical figures are specifically adapted for intensifying the emotions of the audience; and such technical figures he calls by the name "exclamatio". Related to these exclamations is a kind of natural exclamation which, Quintillian notes, is not "simulated or artfully designed." Parrhesia is thus a sort of "figure" among rhetorical figures, but with this characteristic: that it is without any figure since it is completely natural.

**Rhetoric used to distribute power**

How Rhetoric can be used to distribute power will be our last theme to discuss as a Foucaultian contribution to the field of rhetoric. During his debate with Naom Chaomsky, he points out how institutions may use rhetoric as a form of power. And these institutions aren’t always directly associated with the government. An example he gives is that of psychology. If a psychiatrist deems somebody to be legally insane, this patient will never again be able to vote or own a firearm. Foucault asserts that it is normally the upper-class formations and educational backgrounds which develop these terms to apply to the middle and lower-classes.

During an interview with the journal “Herodote”, later published in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews*, Michel talks about spatial metaphors and how they are controlled by a certain kind of power. He gives the example of ‘field’ as an economic/juridical notion just as ‘domain’. ‘Region’ is a fiscal or administrative notion. A ‘horizon’ may be pictorial at a time of peace, but during a time of war, this same landscape is changed by militaristic agency and referred to as a “Territory”. Providing a discussion in geography to demonstrate the discursivity of power in relation to rhetoric can be drawn from this interview. Although not explicit to rhetoric because the interview was conducted under the context of geography, I would argue that this can serve as an example of rhetoric and its relation to power. These instance where institutions exercise are an example of ‘governmentality’ “aiming to shape, guide and govern the behavior of others and the self, or the calculations, measurements and technologies involved in knowing and directing the qualities of a population” as addressed in *Space, Knowledge and Power* (187).

**Conclusion**

So what is the role of rhetoric to Foucalt. It is used to distribute power. The upper class has given power to institutions other than the police or military. Hospitals and psychiatrists have been given power in rhetoric as well. This is why he argues that it should be reconstructed and distributed. People are not equal with their power, they have passed it up the hierarchy, which is why he traced the lineage of the word, parrhesia. This word is a good example of somebody with no power trying to influence the center of power. Does this then become a rhetorical device once it is realized that the lower member must speak the truth?

How do human beings constitute themselves as subjects in relationship to rhetoric was the subject of discussion. What we covered in this discussion is Foucaults relationship between rhetoric and his reality (the formations of discursive networks), his calling for the redistribution of power which can be used rhetorically, the tracing of Parrhesia. Is parrhesia a rhetorical device or really a natural way of speaking. How does this perspective compare to the statement that everything is an argument?

This idea of power in parrhesia also brings about an element which I cannot relate to any other treatise on rhetoric. Today, orators cannot just get up and speak anymore, that power has to be earned and bestowed upon them. This is different from earlier rhetoricians that we studied in this course, I do not recall a treatise on how to earn the power to speak or what you must do, only how and when and whom should speak.