A Comparison Between Michel Foucault and Edward W Said’s Conceptualization of Power

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argues that power is artificially created and exercised by the source: the institution. He says that power is employed in a “net-like organization” (Foucault, *The History* 95) and that individuals “circulate between its threads” (Foucault, *The History* 102). Edward W. Said, a post-colonial theorist, supports this idea of power being formed and created by the institution, and further explains the need of analyzing this power. However, Foucault’s idea of power being “pervasive of an entire social body” (Foucault, *The History* 122) poses a threat for Said. Although they agree on that point, Said further works on developing the bidirectional relationship between the institution and the individual in order to counter the limitations of this conceptualization of power. Furthermore, Foucault does not give any guidance on how to resist domination of power. Therefore, Said has to expand on the real implications of this theory in his text, *Orientalism*. He explores the power struggles between the colonizer and the colonized, such as the misreading of Orientalist materials and how the Orient cannot be studied without the Orientalism, while relying on Foucault’s conceptualization of how power fundamentally works in society. Said focuses Foucault’s notion of power and shows how it can be resisted by using Raymond Williams’ idea of “unlearning of the inherent dominative mode” (Said, 1888).

Foucault and Said both support the idea that power is built from the institution, especially knowledge acting as an agency of power. Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*, “Power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization...” (Foucault, *The History* 92). Here, he explains that to understand his conceptualization of power, one must look
into how it acts upon the ‘sphere’, or the immediate social circle around the individual. He also explains that power comes from different sources and relates to each other in many ways. It does not simply work in a hierarchal way, from top to bottom; rather there are relationships between all the forces acting upon an individual. Like a net, Foucault’s conceptualization of power works through different channels, which are connected to each other. We can infer that power comes from different directions and the channels are dissimilar as well as similar to each other. The diction of ‘immanent’ suggests that power comes from within something and exists in all parts of the universe. This point is brought up later when he explains how power is pervasive of the entire social body. Because power is ‘their own organization’, Foucault implies that power has the ability to control, change, and enforce itself. This is supported by “as the process which, through ceaseless struggle and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or even reverses them” (Foucault, *The History* 92). This quotation depicts power as something that is dynamic and ever changing. It pushes and pulls within itself. The movement is important to note because Said later picks up on this idea to make a positive claim about this theory.

Similarly, Said supports Foucault’s idea of power. “(Power) is formed, irradiated, disseminated; it is instrumental, it is persuasive; it has status, it establishes canons of taste and value; it is indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true” (Said, 1881). The use of anaphora as a rhetorical device helps engage the readers in Said’s definitions of what power is. The repetition of “it is” emphasizes the claims made by the theorist. By deconstructing “it is indistinguishable from certain ideas it dignifies as true”, we can infer that power is in relation to knowledge. Power directly influences the truth of ‘ideas’, hence building on the conceptualization that the whole ‘network’ of power is both the reason for and the effect of the social sciences. This is similar to Foucault’s quotation in *Power/Knowledge*, “It is not possible
for power to be exercised without knowledge; it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault, *Power* 52). This dichotomy is therefore constructed and its relationship between discourse creation of subject is pointed out by both of these theorists. Thus, power and knowledge generate what we know as humans, and this is ‘instrumental’ and ‘persuasive’. The holder of this power, the institution, is therefore subjective. The authority is dangerous because it shapes ‘canons of taste and values’. Power makes what the social sphere perceives as the norm and establishes it upon all knowledge, making the truth. This is of utmost concern for Said because he is investigating the effect of Western discourse determining the portrayal of the ‘east’.

Foucault’s further limits Said’s work by describing power as an omnipresent agent. He writes, “Power is everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, *The History* 93). This is an interesting point to note, because Foucault is essentially saying that if power is everywhere and at all times, than it is equivalent to saying that power is nowhere. And if one were to try rejecting this power, it would only lead to more oppression. Because it does not “embrace everything”, power therefore is elitist and biased. It is a fairly negative take on society because everyone and everything is subjected to these forces and unable to rebel against them. There is nowhere to hide and nowhere to run. How do we change a society then? How would an individual hope to correct negative and wrong truths if power is omnipresent and influences knowledge?

At first, Edward Said seems to agree with Foucault’s development of his conceptualization of power, “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having
authority over the Orient” (Said, 1868). Said again uses anaphora as a rhetoric device to accentuate his description: how power from the Institution (Orientalism) works upon the individual (Orient). Orientalism is defined by Said as a scholarly tradition pervasive in the Western discourse tradition that looks into the ‘Eastern’ part of the world in an outsider’s perspective. Said explains that Orientalism is a power that is oppressive towards the Orient. By further elaborating how this discourse works as a network, Said depicts the problematic and active forcefulness Orientalism has influenced its subject. The power is changing and shaping the individual through a variety of ways that seems omnipresent. Said is interested in this relationship between cultural production and material knowledge. Cultural forms are perceived as pure and true, because Orientalism is seen as the institution, the higher power. Like Foucault had said and investigated in the previous paragraph, power equals knowledge. This power knowledge relationship is at work and through Said’s discourse, we can understand that the relationship between the colony and the colonized is much more complicated than simply a one directional relationship.

However, later on in Orientalism, Edward Said touches on the bidirectional relationship between authority and the individual. He writes, “The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other” (Said, 1869). Said deconstructs the ideological narrative and places it upon real life. Before we understand how Said shows ways to resist Focault’s conceptualization of power, we must first understand the terms of the Orient and Orientalism. The Orient is represented in Orientalism as an individual entity. The power is used to create a system of thoughts and cultures, extending to much more than simply a place. He goes on to explain that the Orient is not only an idea with no reality. Supported by different pieces of evidence describing the East, such as “Disraeli said in his novel Tancred that the East was a
career” (Said, 1869), Said connects us to this theory of bidirectionality. He explains that Disraeli meant that being interested in the East is a passion for young Westerners. Disraeli did not mean to trivialize the great and abundant culture of the East; therefore by merely studying it, Orientalists are only able to acknowledge it. They cannot present a full portrayal of the Orient, requiring years and “all-consuming passion” (Said, 1869). Another point Said brings up is that the individual cannot be studied without the authority. He describes this force, the Orientalist, seizing the fact that the Orient was different and therefore had the potential to be “Oriental”. He talks about the artificiality creation of this place, the authority speaking for its individual. By understanding Orientalism, we understand why the power is being placed and how the Oriental is portrayed through knowledge. Said suggests that there is resistant from the dominated individual; the Orient does push back to counter the Orientalists; and, Foucault only described how authority dominates over the individual in a one directional force.

Many theorists have criticized Foucault, questioning whether his agency of power gives us any guidance on how and when to resist oppression. In *The History of Sexuality*, he perceives and wants a future without his conceptualization of power, but does not go into further detail on how we can achieve this future. If power is pervasive everywhere and in all aspects of life, is there really anything that can be done without attracting more power forced upon us? Edward Said uses Raymond William’s idea of “unlearning the inherent dominative mode” (Said, 1888) in order to further attempt at resisting Foucault’s notion of power. This is when we eliminate the “orient” and the “occident” altogether. Occidentalism is an inversion of Orientalism; it consists of mainly stereotyped Western perceptions of the East. These are faulty truths that have become the norm since Orientalism. Williams suggests that our mind is full of barriers that limit the growth of the truth. In a sense, we can understand that even the individual is placing a sort of
power within itself. Said urges us to liberate ourselves from this power by unthinking the concepts of “orient” and “occident”, and therefore eradicating the problem all together. Power is an artificial social construction, something completely man-made, and so is the Orient. In order to achieve the perfect future that Foucault had envisioned, one must move past a simple awareness of racist texts. Said is advising us to learn objectively, and not trivialize these seemingly erroneous texts. But how does one “unlearn” preconceptions shaped by experiences? What about when we do “unlearn” some predominant modes but only to replace them with other ones? Textual unconsciousness, developed from Freud’s psychoanalyses, also affects how we perceive knowledge. But neither Foucault nor Said explain how this might work into their conceptualization of power. Nonetheless, Said gives an alternative way to change the oppressive situation depicted by Foucault.

Michel Foucault sets up his conceptualization of power in *The History of Sexuality*; he describes power as an artificial ‘network’ created by the institution, in particular, knowledge. Foucault explains that power acts upon society in a pervasive way, which limits the post-colonial theorist, Edward W. Said. However, Said takes on board Foucault’s theory and attempts to make it into a positive claim by exploring the bidirectional relationship between the colony and the colonized, such as the misreading of Orientalist materials, and that the Orient cannot be studied without the Orientalism. He uses Raymond Williams’ idea of “unlearning the inherent dominative mode” (Said, 1888) to give us guidance on how to resist Foucault’s notion of power. Perhaps through breaking down of assumptions we can apply these theories not only in postcolonial situations but also in gender studies. This resistance towards Foucault’s conceptualization of power opens up different possibilities for not only the oppressed Orient, but every dominated individual.
Bibliography

