

After you have read my crude synopsis Michel Foucault's ideas about social control, please read the longer version hyperlinked below.

[Foucault reading](#)

DISCOURSE, or POWER/KNOWLEDGE (a rough definition):

In the simplest sense discourse is conversation, or information. For Michel Foucault it is through discourse (through knowledge) that we are created. Think of it this way: If it is true that we are the sum of our experiences (the knowledge we encounter), then those in control of our early life experiences have enormous power. In an isolated family, a child's knowledge depends upon just a few people. In a sense, those few people create the child's identity. The child cannot know anything but what is communicated by them.

Discourse joins power and knowledge, and its power follows from our casual acceptance of the "reality with which we are presented" (Peter Weir, dir., on his *The Truman Show*). If our identity is created by the media, as it is increasingly, our world view is limited to the world view of those isolated, rich, individuals; we are made to think that we, too, should have a mercedes (thereby making those in control even richer). Discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication. Those who are in control decide who we are by deciding what we discuss. All discourse acts this way. For example, by inundating us with images of the Star Wars prequel, the media limits us to the Force and Yoda, not allowing us to see a segment on, say, poverty in rural America.

According to Foucault, truth, morality, and meaning are created through discourse. Every age has a dominant group of discursive elements that people live in unconsciously. In the past, the idea of individualism was prominent in American discourse. To not be individualistic, i.e. be "communist," was to be evil. So that discourse in a college class, more specifically, will ultimately privilege ideas of what is normal ("good" and "normative" morals); by stressing these values, education will implicitly marginalize those who don't hold those values.

Visualize discourse as an arrangement of ideas and concepts within which the world is known--or a box of crayons. The fact that we do not know a "color" (burnt umber, for instance) makes us reject that color out of hand and this makes perfect sense: If we can bring no past knowledge to bear on a new "color" it is natural to reject that "color" as perverse, that is, unnatural. Discourse assists in explaining how historical events like the Red Scare occur.

Change may only happen when a new counter-discursive element begins to receive wide attention through the means of communication. If you are within the discourse of the South during the time of slavery, as a slave you will only understand yourself in the terms that this discourse allows. In other words, the slave (often) believes and conforms to the picture that this discourse draws of him or her. Naturally, the master's free will is just as much curtailed.

Change requires the possession of the means of communication, of self representation. Note: a discourse is never totally "pure;" it will always contain some measure of counter-discursive elements.

I want to stress that while I think Foucault very persuasively explains how power works and why some people perform very irrational acts, it has some serious drawbacks. Within Foucault's world view there is no absolute morality. Morality is created through the exercise of power. What this means ultimately is that if one were to take Foucault to his extreme, there would be no basis for saying that any act that we typically think of as immoral is in fact immoral. There are of course foucaultian responses to this argument.

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