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Hobbes and Foucault: A Modern Interpretation of Two Forms of Power

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Abstract: Hobbes, through his theory of the social contract, argues that sovereign power must be centralized and repressive in order to secure social order and safety. Foucault, by contrast, breaks with the traditional view of centralized power and proposes that power is omnipresent, operating at a micro level throughout all layers of society by means of knowledge and techniques. A comparative analysis of their theories of power reveals the diversity and complexity of power forms in modern society, as well as how technology, knowledge, and social institutions jointly shape the behavior of individuals and collectives. Examining how transformations of power reflect socio-historical change further shows the potential threats that power poses to individual freedom in a context of technological and digital development.

Keywords: Hobbes; Foucault; Transformation of Power; Modern Society

1. Introduction

Power, as a core social concept, has occupied an important position in politics, philosophy, and social theory since its emergence. However, it is not immutable; rather, it is continuously redefined and constructed under different historical conditions. Hobbes's theory of sovereign power is rooted in the background of religious wars and state turmoil in early modern Europe, where he explained the legitimacy of power through the social contract. Foucault's disciplinary power, by contrast, focuses on the distributional characteristics of power in modern society, proposing a new perspective in which power shapes subjects through knowledge and social institutions. From Hobbes's "sovereign power" to Foucault's "micro-power," the connotation and operational logic of power underwent profound transformation. This transformation not only reveals the evolutionary path of power from centralization to dispersion, but also shows how power functions in the everyday life of modern society. This article aims to compare the power theories of Hobbes and Foucault, explore the evolutionary process from sovereignty to micro-power, and analyze how this transformation reveals the complexity of modern forms of power.

2. Hobbes's Sovereign Power

Hobbes's theory of sovereign power is primarily expressed in his classic work Leviathan. Taking the "state of nature" as the theoretical starting point, he depicts a tense scene of a "war of all against all" and explains the reason for the emergence of sovereign power. That is, in the absence of common rules and authority, individuals' lives fall into loneliness, poverty, danger, and disorder, full of conflict and violence between people. Hobbes believed that the only solution is to establish an absolute authority above everyone. To achieve this goal, people voluntarily surrender part of their natural rights through a social contract and concentrate power in the hands of a sovereign. This sovereign, based on absolute power, ensures social order, security, and stability. From Hobbes's perspective, sovereign power possesses the following core characteristics. First, centralization. In the "state of nature," the dispersion of power makes each person a potential threat, thereby plunging everyone into a state of war, which contradicts the purpose of establishing sovereignty by covenant [1]. Second, repressiveness. Sovereignty not only needs to establish behavioral norms through law, but also must maintain the enforcement of these norms through force and war, so as to ensure the fulfillment of the contract and social security. Third, absoluteness. Whether a state is "established by covenant" or "acquired by force," the sovereign is absolute; regardless of the form of government a state adopts, subjects must obey the sovereign unconditionally [2]. Ultimately, Hobbes's theory returns to the

necessity of sovereignty. Sovereignty ends the "war of all against all." Without sovereignty, society will inevitably slip back into the chaos and disorder of the state of nature; sovereignty is the soul of the state, and once the soul is separated from the body, the limbs can no longer receive any movement from the soul.

In Hobbes's view, sovereign power is maintained internally through law and externally consolidated or expanded through war. Therefore, his theory of sovereign power can be verified from the dual perspectives of law and war. On the one hand, Hobbes uses the metaphor of the body's nerves and tendons that govern the movements of limbs and joints to explain the instrumental role of law for sovereignty. He points out that the reason why the world needs laws is nothing else but to restrict individuals' innate freedom in such a way that they do not harm but assist one another, and unite to defend against common enemies. At the same time, law also has a guiding function. As a norm endowed with authority, its role is not to restrict individuals' free actions but to guide and protect people, preventing them from harming themselves due to impulsiveness, recklessness, or negligence. Most importantly, the legislator is not a mere human individual, but acts through a representative. Therefore, the sovereign is the sole legislator. Thus, Hobbes emphasizes that sovereignty is the living God, the source of law, and justice itself, and that the person representing sovereignty is the instrument of God, law, and justice in governing [3]. On the other hand, war is the analyzer of power relations. He uniformly defines the aforementioned riots and disordered chaos as the "state of war." In this warlike condition, because there is no common power to make everyone fearful, each person is an enemy to every other. At the same time, they live in a permanent state of war; around the battlefield, borders are armed, and cannons are aimed at all neighbors. Its consequence is that individuals cannot escape the cycle of violence and fear. People in civilized society gradually realize that only by living within the state and willingly accepting its restraints can they preserve themselves and live a more satisfactory life; otherwise, they will fall into the miserable state of war [4]. In this logic, the fear effect brought about by war as the normal condition of pre-modern society led to the emergence of the sovereign and its system of rule [5]. In Society Must Be defended, foucault also explores in depth the relationship among power, law, and war. On many issues, foucault's position differs significantly from hobbes's views.

3. Foucault's Micro-Power

First, Foucault breaks the foundational role that law plays in grounding state rationality by constructing two schemas of power. These two schemas include one that is Hobbes's contract–oppression schema, which is a power model based on law; and another that is the war–repression schema or domination–repression schema advocated by Foucault [6]. However, this does not mean that power lacks repressive or negative elements, but only that the analytical focus differs [7]. In Hobbes's theory, the core of power is law and contract, and the opposition between legal and illegal determines the stability of social order. Foucault, however, believes that in his schema, power is the opposition between struggle and submission, and law is not the only determining factor. In his view, law is still a trap. It is not a limitation on power but rather an instrument of power; it is not a means of just governance but a means serving particular interests. When society enters modernity, Foucault believes that we must detach ourselves from the brutal ruling power of the sovereign and must think about the productivity and positivity of power within its oppressive and repressive effects. Especially in the 17th and 18th centuries, there appeared a disciplinary power. It would establish a certain norm, not law, but normalization. It must take as its theoretical reference not the edifice of law but the field of human sciences, that is, the sciences concerning human beings themselves. Moreover, in Foucault's view, these two forms of power—sovereign power and disciplinary power—are heterogeneous, and their discourses are incompatible. The judicial discourse of sovereign power follows and determines legal rules, and must take the legal edifice as its theoretical horizon, whereas the discourse of disciplinary power is extremely creative, follows natural norms, determines rules of normalization, and must take the field of science as its theoretical horizon [8]. Once we become entangled in modern power relations, we are no longer merely within the framework of law or sovereign authority; we are situated within a more complex and far-reaching network of domination that carries the historical

sedimentation and perpetual interweaving of various forms of power.

Subsequently, Foucault offers a deeper interpretation of Hobbes's "state of war". First, Foucault does not believe that the establishment of the state completely eliminates war. He emphasizes that even after the state system is established, the threat of war still exists, and it may manifest through external wars, political uprisings, or internal social inequalities. That is to say, the state is not the terminator of war, but the manager of war; power structures do not completely eliminate conflict but manage and regulate these conflicts in a more hidden and institutionalized way. Second, Foucault points out that what Hobbes calls the "state of war" is not a short-term or local battle, but a long-term condition. This state is endless and closely connected with the passage of time. As time goes by, the universalization of war clearly transcends the level of individual struggle. People will see a historical war involving entire social entities; it is no longer a conflict between individuals but a confrontation between groups. Most importantly, Foucault clarifies that the "original war" described in Hobbes's theory does not mean direct physical confrontation but a long-term, latent display of power and diplomatic struggle. This contest is full of strategies of mutual display, that is, controlling the opponent's behavior through expressions of will and threats of force. For power, the expression and display of will are more important than the use of violence. Therefore, Foucault concludes that the establishment of domination has nothing to do with war. Whether war exists or not, domination will be established in the same way. However, this does not mean that Foucault erases the analytical role of war as an analyzer of power relations. The reason is that in a given state, war is also a general economy of weapons; it involves the economic relations between armed and unarmed populations, and the various institutions and economic structures derived from it. Simply put, behind war and aggression is a military institution, and the military institution can extend to the overall institutional and economic structure of the state. As Foucault says, war can also serve as a thread. Just as one cannot ignore this thread when writing the history of French society.

This means that Foucault must reset a concept of power, one that differs from both the legal model and the war model. Needless to say, Foucault not only distances himself from the legal concept of power but also breaks through the concept of power understood from the perspective of war [9]. He emphasizes that the study of power should not be confined to a macro-analysis of the state apparatus, legal system, and ideology; rather, we must liberate ourselves from the "Leviathan" model. It is not enough to study only the legal form of state sovereignty; we must also analyze how power permeates individuals' lives through everyday social practices, technologies, and institutions. In the profound interweaving of knowledge and power, scientific discourse exerts a normalizing function through institutionalized forms, thereby shaping and governing the individual's body and soul [10]. What can serve as a "new analyzer" of power relations is precisely Foucault's core idea—the concept of power–knowledge. By criticizing traditional humanism and the thought framework of "the death of God," he challenges the fixed relationship between knowledge and power, proposing that knowledge itself is a form of power capable of governing individual behavior and influencing social norms. Knowledge is not essentially a "natural representation"; it is produced by historical power structures and social needs. He opposes the view that knowledge is independent of power relations and exists as a universal truth unrelated to historical and cultural contexts. He argues that knowledge itself is fluid and relative, the product of society rather than the result of nature. Particularly at the end of the 18th century, changes in social, economic, and political structures led to profound transformations in the forms of power. With the emergence of capitalist modes of production, the limitations of traditional modes of power operation gradually became exposed. To adapt to the new social environment, the techniques of power also needed to undergo corresponding reform—becoming more efficient while reducing economic and political costs. Power structures in modern society are diffused into every corner of social life; consumerism colludes with technologies of power to produce new bodies and desires [11]. On the surface, a series of reform movements during this transformation of power seemed to promote the development of knowledge. In reality, this was also a reshaping of power structures—the reproduction of knowledge served this power structure and promoted the further refinement and systematization of power. Thus, we can see

another characteristic of power from Foucault's perspective. First, productivity. Power not only manifests repressiveness but also possesses productivity, capable of constructing knowledge and the social reality behind it [12]. Second, heterogeneity. Institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons are not merely places that manage individual behavior but are important sites for knowledge production and the exercise of power. Third, technicality. On the surface, the transformation of power seems to solve only technical problems. But in essence, through this multi-channel technical transformation, it creates an entirely new social order.

In short, Foucault's theory of micro-power is no longer limited to forms of war and law, but reveals through the analysis of "micro-power" domains such as schools and hospitals how the interweaving of knowledge and power penetrates all levels of society. In schools, the coercive principle of normalization gave rise to standardized education systems and "normal schools." The education system, through curriculum, discipline, and assessment, regulates students' behavior, thinking, and social roles, shaping society's understanding and expectations of qualified citizens. For example, universities' function of selection determines the filtering of knowledge; by establishing authoritative scientific groups, knowledge becomes homogenized and organized in a unified manner, and ultimately, this process directly or indirectly promotes the centralization of state institutions. Similarly, in hospitals, illness is no longer a simple biological phenomenon but is redefined and classified; the patient's body becomes a domain that can be diagnosed, managed, and even normalized. Throughout the latter half of the 18th century, the homogenization, normalization, division, and concentration of medical knowledge continued to advance. How should medical knowledge be given clear content and form? How should consistent rules be established for therapeutic activities? How should these rules be communicated to the public? Compared with the sharing of knowledge with the public, what is more important is making it easier for them to accept it. This process contributed to the establishment of hospitals, clinics, and royal medical societies, the professionalization of medicine, and the development of large-scale public health movements. These social institutions, which seem unrelated to power, are in fact intersections where power is exercised and knowledge is produced, further reconstructing individual behavior and social order. Ultimately, power takes on the responsibility of ensuring the normal operation of the physiological processes of the population and social stability. This responsibility is not undertaken through punishment and constraint, but through optimizing and safeguarding factors such as group health and productivity, enabling society to reach a relatively ideal "state of balance." Thus, the relationship between individuals and collectives, and between power and knowledge, becomes more tightly connected, and the boundaries of social governance are expanded.

4. Analysis and Comparison

Indeed, changes in times and circumstances influence and shape human beings, and Hobbes's theory of sovereign power profoundly reflects the historical context of 17th-century Europe [13]. At that time, the collapse of the monarchy and the execution of Charles I plunged England into a vacuum without a stable regime. Moreover, due to the conflict between Puritans and Anglicans, religious issues continually permeated political struggles. Hobbes's theory of the sovereign state demanded national unity and integrity, opposing all forms of feudal fragmentation. By emphasizing that absolute monarchy is conducive to maintaining national dignity as well as the stability of social governance and class rule, his theory possessed a certain historical progressiveness [14]. He also attempted to replace the narrative of perpetual domestic war and conflict with the concept of contract, thereby providing a solution for state theory and ensuring state order and stability. However, Hobbes's construction of the "state of nature" is overly idealized, neglecting the complexity and diversity of human social development, consequently the project lacked a principle of critique and reflection grounded in real conditions [15]. Moreover, Hobbes's emphasis on absolute sovereignty provided a theoretical basis for later autocratic regimes, becoming a focus of subsequent critique and reflection. In addition, although he constantly stressed the supremacy of self-preservation, he ultimately failed to establish personal freedom as a genuine priority in a public and especially practical sense. Therefore, as Alan Ryan states,

Hobbes is not a liberal; his argument, ultimately, is only pluralistic [16].

With the Industrial Revolution and profound social transformations, the emergence of factories, commerce, and labor markets gave rise to the refined management of labor. Workers were required to follow strict schedules, operational procedures, and production norms to ensure efficient productivity. In this process, individuals' behavior and bodies were no longer free but needed to be managed and controlled. Foucault not only challenged the singularity of traditional sovereign power but also opened a new understanding of how power operates in everyday life, marking a shift in power theory from a macro perspective to a micro perspective and revealing the complexity of power in modern society. However, in Foucault's discussion, he consistently emphasized attention to power relations and their operational strategies while deliberately avoiding discussion of the nature and origin of power, thereby resulting in his power theory lacking the possibility of introducing normative values. Furthermore, forms of power in different countries, regions, and historical periods may vary in concrete practice, and Foucault sometimes failed to sufficiently account for these differences and changes.

In sum, regarding differences, Hobbes's theory of power is based on law and contract, emphasizing the centralization and repressiveness of power and belonging to the macro category. Foucault's theory of power is characterized by dispersion and productivity, highlighting how power achieves social control through micro-mechanisms. Their core difference is that Hobbes views power as a fixed authoritative relationship, whereas Foucault reveals the dynamic and omnipresent operational logic of power. From the perspective of applicability, Hobbes's theory applies to pre-capitalist societies, focusing on finding a legitimate foundation for a state that has not yet been fully integrated. Foucault's theory, however, is suited to modern society, focusing on how power becomes decentralized and efficient through technologies and institutions. In a historical perspective, the two theories reveal the characteristics of power at different stages. They do not constitute a relationship of mutual replacement; rather, combining them is necessary for understanding power and political relations in modern society.

5. Conclusion

From Hobbes's sovereign power to Foucault's disciplinary power, the form of power has undergone a transformation from centralization to dispersion. This transformation not only reflects the diversity of power under historical conditions but also reveals the complexity of modern forms of power. By comparing the two power theories, one can uncover the historicized characteristics of power production and operation, showing that power is not fixed but embedded in specific social structures and technological practices. In contemporary society, technologicalization and digitalization are further deepening the mechanisms of power described by Foucault. The penetrative and concealed nature of power poses new challenges to individual freedom, reminding us that when studying power relations, we must remain vigilant about the potentially repressive consequences that power may bring in its new forms.

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