

Comment

Cui prodest Michel Foucault?

Yurij Castelfranchi, Nico Pitrelli

Do we have to drag in the thought of Michel Foucault to show the political (and not neutral), partial and local (and not universal and non-historic), active (and not merely transmissive) face of science communication? Do we need the work of the controversial French intellectual to dispute the anxious search – almost a quest like that for the Holy Grail – for the “best practices” in the dissemination of scientific culture?

If we read over the pages that Foucault dedicated to words and things, to the archaeology and genealogy of knowledge, to biopolitics, we have few doubts. Two elements, on the one hand the central nature of discourse and “regimes of truth”, on the other the concept of biopower (a “power over bodies”), enable us to reflect both on the important specific features of modern science in comparison with other forms of production and organisation of knowledge, and on the central role of its communication.

According to Foucault’s reading of the history of the West, with the birth of capitalism and national identities modern States no longer resort to death threats to maintain power, but to statistics and probability “to control populations”. If in the past (for example, in the *patria potestas* of the Romans), one of the characteristic privileges of power was the right to decide between life and death – that is it was “a power of taking life or of letting live” – taking away later came to be not the main form of power, but one element among many. Power came to be “administering life”, defining it, even dictating the rules for “caring of the self”.

Today, biopower is reflected in the public policies on reproductive technologies, on genetic engineering, on embryos, on stem cells, on cloning. Extremely up-to-date topics, scientific practices and techniques in which Foucault identifies the process of reducing the living body to a body-object to be classified, regulated, controlled, submitted to the demands of the market.

In this commentary on *Jcom*, Mario Colucci takes his cue from different texts by Foucault to explain the meaning of “medicalisation” and show how medicine is going beyond its boundaries, the translation into medical terms of problems that ought to be tackled with social measures has come about through the construction of public consent.

The presumed objectivity of the ill body with the consequent necessary distance between physician and patient are the necessary ingredients on which the saving image of medicine is based. Pierangelo Di Vittorio explains very well what price has to be paid for the ideal of a totally healthy society, pointing out disturbing similarities between futuristic literary visions and Foucault’s historic analysis of the birth of public health.

Besides, according to Foucault, from the moment when (at the end of the Renaissance) words become separate from things and the sign becomes central in the construction of representations, discourse takes on a central role. It is not the mere activity, *a posteriori*, of a subject communicating with other subjects. On the contrary, it is that which makes up subjectivity. We are born surrounded by *epistemes* that define the conditions of what may be thought, the combination of the possible discourses in a given period. We live immersed in regimes that establish what is right and what is wrong, and these are the discourses that make up our subjectivity. According to that view (a controversial and criticised one), for Foucault the discourse of the market becomes the place of truth about the social world, while the discourse of science determines the regime of truth about the natural world. In his *Birth of biopolitics*, unpublished until a short time ago and discussed in the comment by Flavia da Silva Medeiros, Foucault analyses the contemporary world for the first time, finding profound differences between the capitalism of the Industrial Revolution and present-day neoliberalism.

For anyone who, like us, is interested in the role of science communication in the processes of constructing the public meaning of science, the thought of Michel Foucault offers interesting points for reflection. If social truth is defined by the market and natural truth by science – and if technoscience and the market become one the driving force of the other – it results that the public communication of science and technology takes on roles and functions that go far beyond that of spreading or democratising knowledge. Communication becomes, among other things, a central figure for the constitution of individuals and for the “administration” of society.

Some people find Foucault ideological, radical, exaggerated. But rereading him today offers us a “lay” perspective, and at the same time a demanding one, for reviewing science communication. Anyone who concentrates only on how to improve the techniques of spreading knowledge risks not only failing to achieve his objective, but participating, consciously or otherwise, in the imposing of cultural standards which have rather the flavour of ideology than of participation in democratic debate.