

# ‘Map Is Not The Territory’: Challenging The Conventions With Reference To The Ideas Of New Thinkers

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## Abstract:

While Aristotelean thinking supported the idea that things just are a certain way and can be described in a finite and satisfactory manner and Newtonian physics stated that the world is considered a collection of finite, separate phenomena that can be studied in isolation from anything else, a new way of perceiving the things developed with Alfred Korzybski and Michel Foucault, who re-examined the old ways of conceptualization and map-building. Both came with their own theories called General Semantics by Alfred Korzybski and New Historicism by Michel Foucault. Alfred Korzybski developed the theory in his book “Science & Sanity” (1933) where he stated that any map may have a structure that is either similar or dissimilar to the structure of the territory and that physical objects and phenomena cannot be regarded unchangeable, finite constructs that could be studied in isolation. This system of logic and of studying man’s relation to his world where things were found to be much more interdependent and fluid than earlier assumed was the start of General Semantics, a Non-Aristotelean system which came up with Korzybski’s best known dictum “The map is not the territory”. In the same way, Michel Foucault, the French postmodernist uses the term ‘power/knowledge’ to signify that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and ‘truth’. Foucault challenges the idea that power is wielded by people or groups by way of ‘episodic’ or ‘sovereign’ acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive stating ‘Power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’ so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure (Foucault 1998: 63). Instead it is a kind of ‘metapower’ or ‘regime of truth’ that pervades society, and which is in constant flux and negotiation. In this way, both the thinkers question the old definitions of map and power and present a new and more inclusive system of knowledge and power. The paper would attempt the re-examination of evidences and assumptions by Korzybski and Foucault, challenging the conventional forms of knowledge and reality.

**Key-words:** re-examination, evidences, assumptions, phenomena, episodic, conceptualization, metapower.

Understanding 'truth' is a complex process, just as reading a 'text' is. When we speak of a text in English studies we usually mean a particular bound and covered entity such as William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*. It might mean 'a structural impression' which might come about through a way of combining parts of a whole, as in music, art, or writing; or, finally, it could mean the quality conveyed to the senses by woven fabrics. However, one might raise certain fundamental questions: Isn't it as if the truth had got lost on the way to becoming a text, as if it was the job of the critic to find it again by reading? Does this make the text just a vehicle for delivering meaning or a coat that needed to be taken off? Well this model of the text is as old as our history and our language opposes it systematically to all the things it might represent. The best text would be one that conveyed the most accurate impressions of the reality. However, the trouble with the text is that it might not convey the *right* and the *true* impression, and it might therefore be misleading. A rhetorical frontier has been drawn between the *truth* of things and the *text*. This brings us to an important conclusion that text is made up of certain assumptions and evidences, which might attempt to represent truth, but are not truth themselves. These thoughts have been very well discussed by Jacques Derrida in his work *Of Grammatology* (1966) as 'deconstruction', a critical outlook concerned with the relationship between text and meaning. Deconstruction shakes up a concept like *text* in a way that provokes questions about the borders, the frontiers, the edges, or the limits that have been drawn to mark out its place in the history of concepts. Meanings take on their identity, they come to mean what they mean, by just such a marking out of frontiers, opposing concepts to each other, defining terms by their differences.

While 'truth' is questionable and 'knowledge' is difficult to be understood, the present paper presents the ideas of two thinkers namely Alfred Korzybski and Michel Foucault, questioning the old definitions of 'map' and 'power' and presenting a new and more inclusive system of 'knowledge' and 'truth'. The paper would attempt the re-examination of stereo-type evidences and assumptions, as done by Korzybski and Foucault, challenging the conventional forms of knowledge and reality.

### **Michel Foucault**

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, a disguised Marxist, both a secret and explicit anti-Marxist, a nihilist, a new conservative, a new liberal and a neutral interpretivist, presented the politics that made everybody to reflect over the conventional philosophy and to be ready for the differing view. While the traditional thinking maintains the idea that 'Knowledge is power', Foucault puts forth an altogether different view that mechanisms of power produce different types of knowledge which collate information on people's activities and existence. The knowledge gathered in this way further reinforces exercises of power.

Contrary to many interpretations, Foucault believed in possibilities for action and resistance. He was an active social and political commentator who saw a role for the 'organic intellectual'. His ideas about action were concerned with our capacities to recognise and question socialised norms and constraints. To challenge power is not a matter of seeking some 'absolute truth' (which is in any case a socially produced power), but 'of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time' (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991: 75).

According to Foucault's understanding of power, power is based on knowledge and makes use of knowledge; on the other hand, power reproduces knowledge by shaping it in accordance with its anonymous intentions. Power (re-) creates its own fields of exercise through knowledge. For Foucault, power and knowledge are not seen as independent entities but are inextricably related—knowledge is always an exercise of power and power always a function of knowledge. It is important to note that Foucault understood power/knowledge as productive as well as constraining. Power/knowledge not only limits what we can do, but also opens up new ways of acting and thinking about ourselves.

Foucault starts one of his seminal works *Discipline and Punish* with a graphic description of a torture scene from 18th century France. A regicide called Damiens is publicly drawn and quartered, after having the skin peeled from his body and a combination of sulphur, oil and lead poured into his wounds. The book then jumps ahead 80 years to a description of the new way of dealing with criminals, the prison. Instead of public execution we now have a time-table. The prisoners' day involves time for prayers, reading, workshops, meals and recreation; a reflection of a more enlightened, humanist form of governance one would assume.

The problem with the old public torture and executions according to Foucault was not their cruelty, but that they didn't have the intended effect. The victims became the heroes of folk tales and pamphlets. Breeding more resentment than discipline, the scaffold, the great displays of power and brutality, were replaced by disciplining and normalising institutions of less visible, more discreet, and most importantly, more 'efficient', power. The prison, and its panoptic architecture, was for Foucault a perfect example of these new technologies of power. In the panopticon, the prisoner can be observed at any time. However, because the observation tower in the middle of the prison is also a source of light, he doesn't know when he is actually being watched, therefore acts with the assumption of an omnipresent observer. Along with the other methods such as the examination of a parole board hearing, the prisoner is slowly normalised back into society. The same panoptic principles of normalising judgements, examination and omnipresent, hierarchical observation – that have their ideal model in military camps where soldiers were made from the 'formless clay' of a peasant – are also incorporated into the schools, factories, asylums, working class housing estates and hospitals of the era.

Such a conception of power in the modern world seems to leave little space for agency or resistance from those subject to it; this is one of the most common critiques of Foucault coming from the left. People are merely individual copies that are mechanically punched out. Power is then everywhere, in every relationship; we are constantly subjecting it and being objects of it. Thus Foucault gives the notion of the state as all- powerful and all-seeing i.e. 'panoptic' (meaning 'all-seeing'). Just as single warder positioned at the center of the circle surveyed the tiered ranks of cells, the panoptic state maintains its surveillance not by physical force and intimidation, but by the power of its 'discursive practices' which circulates its ideology throughout the body politic.

Foucault's 'discursive' is the adjective of the noun 'discourse' which is not just a way of speaking or writing, but the whole 'mental set' and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given society. It is not singular and monolithic- there is always a multiplicity of discourses- so that the operation of power structures is as significant a factor in the family as in layers of government.

'Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it... We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart.' (Foucault 1998: 100-1).

These 'general politics' and 'regimes of truth' are the result of scientific discourse and institutions, and are reinforced (and redefined) constantly through the education system, the media, and the flux of political and economic ideologies. In this sense, the 'battle for truth' is not for some absolute truth that can be discovered and accepted, but is a battle about 'the rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true'... a battle about 'the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays' (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991). To explain his ideas Foucault emphasises the 'thought control' with the implication that 'deviant' thinking may become literally 'unthinkable' (or only thinkable), so that the State is seen as a monolithic structure and change becomes almost impossible. This happens because power is internalised by those whom it disempowers, so that it does not have to be constantly enforced externally. These ideas of Foucault fall into the category of 'New Historicism', which is resolutely anti-establishment, always implicitly on the side of liberal ideals of personal freedom and accepting and celebrating all forms of differences and deviances. In this sense, Foucault is successful in proving the point that the reality presented before us is most probably based on the assumptions and evidences, and there are many other assumptions and evidences possible. John Gaventa, currently the Director of Research at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, who broke new theoretical and empirical ground in the study of social power with his articulation and empirical demonstration of the 'three-dimensional' approach to the study of power, comments thus on Foucault:

'His work marks a radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them.'

(Gaventa 2003: 1)

That power comes from multiple sources means there must be multiple sources of resistance – in contrast to the Marxist-Leninist conception of power as emanating from one source, capital, with all other struggles secondary to, or a product of, that primary battle. If one fails to tackle the multiple sources of power,

one risks allowing them to continue to exist; and to see this class power reconstitute itself even after an apparent revolutionary process. This forms the basis of Foucault's theory that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and 'truth':

### Alfred Korzybski

Trained as an engineer and a mathematician; Alfred Habdank Skarbek Korzybski ( July 3, 1879 – March 1, 1950) was a polish- American independent scholar who studied mental illness in association with the famous Dr . William Alanson White in Washington. He developed a field called 'general semantics', which is the result of both his scientific and psychiatric studies, from which he inferred that the orientations of science and the orientations that result in sanity are very similar- hence the title of his book- *Science and Sanity*. The Aristotelian system is two-valued: either-or, yes-no, day-night, life-death, black-white etc., which pervades our current level of thinking, teaching, and abstracting. The prevalence of the two-valued system of thinking puzzled Korzybski for many years, as he states in his Introduction to the Second Edition (1941):

[page xxi] In living, many issues are not so sharp, and therefore a *system which posits the general sharpness of 'either-or', and so objectifies 'kind',* is unduly limited; it must be revised and made more flexible in terms of 'degree'. This requires a physico-mathematical 'way of thinking' which a *non-aristotelian* system supplies.

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However, as his work progressed, it became obvious to Korzybski that 'a theory of meaning' was impossible. As such, he thought it necessary to explain the derivation of the name 'General Semantics' for his corpus of work.

[page xxii] The original manuscript did not contain the word 'semantics' or 'semantic', but when I had to select some terms, from a time-binding point of view and in consideration of the efforts of others, I introduced the term '*General Semantics*' for the *modus operandi* of this first non-aristotelian system. This seemed appropriate for historical continuity. A theory of evaluation appeared to follow naturally in an evolutionary sense from 1) 'meaning to' to 2) 'significance' to 3) *evaluation*. *General Semantics* turned out to be an empirical natural science of non-elementalistic evaluation, which takes into account the living individual, not divorcing him from his reactions altogether, nor from his neuro-linguistic and neuro-semantic environments, but allocating him a *plenum* of some values, no matter what.

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Bobby Matherne, in his material written on Science and Sanity and its Author, Alfred Korzybski comments thus

Two important characteristics of maps should be noticed. A map *is not* the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness. If the map could be ideally correct, it would include, in a reduced scale, the map of the map; the map of the map of the map; and so on, endlessly,...

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While grammar deals with word-to-word relations embodying the rules about how to put words together into sentences, and logic deals with the sentences as assertions, general semantics deals with the relations between 'thought' and behaviour: between how we talk, therefore how we 'think', and therefore how we act. For the logician words need not have any meaning except as defined by other words, and the assertion need not have any relations to the world of fact. To the semanticist, words and assertions have meaning only if they are related operationally to referents in the world of nature. The semanticist defines not only validity (as the logician does) but also 'truth'. General semantics goes furthest: it deals not only with words, assertions, and their referents in nature but also with their effects on human behaviour. For a 'general semanticist', communication is not merely words in proper order properly inflected (as for the grammarian) or assertions in proper relation to each other (as for the logician) or assertions in proper relation to referents (as for the semanticist), but all these, together with the reactions of the nervous systems of the human beings involved in the communication. According to Korzybski, reality is often decided by the 'neuro-semantic' or 'neuro-linguistic' reactions to it, i.e., the functioning of the 'human-organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment', with hyphens deliberately used to indicate interconnectedness. Korzybski emphasises on the human process of abstracting, i.e., we abstract from our experience only a fraction of the totality, and that fraction is not 'random', but depends on our particular nervous system, our physical state at the time, our needs and objectives, etc. Thus what one sees, hears, feels on any occasion is particular to him and will not be exactly the same for anyone else at the same time and place.

This means the stock of words and phrases that we use to communicate an experience may mean different to others than what we wanted to convey. The problem of the matching of words to things, events and experience is tackled by Korzybski's use of an effective analogy, in which he considers language as a kind of 'map' of the 'territory' of reality. In the same way that a good map has a structure or shape similar to that of the actual territory, language will be accurate to the extent that its structure parallels the things and ideas spoken or written about. This analogy illustrates certain important conclusions: Just as the map is not the territory, the word is not the thing. Just as we can make a map of a map, we can make a statement about a statement, and use words about words. We grow up and live in a world comprised, in large measure, of the verbal maps inside our heads. For many 'territories' we have only 'maps', no first-hand experience. In other cases we are conditioned, and often prejudiced, by 'maps' long before we ever experience the 'territory' (the



link with Transactional Analysis is easily seen here). We very frequently mistake our 'maps' (words and ideas) for the world 'out there'. We eat the menu, as it were, rather than the meal.

According to Korzybski, human beings live in a world of process, change and dynamic structure, yet they map it with static words. The same word may stand for a person or thing or activity year after year, while what it stands for may change, grow and transform. It is not possible to suggest the uniqueness of the world in the language i.e. the verbal map. Sometimes we go in the opposite direction and create 'verbal wholes' or 'maps' for which it is difficult or impossible to find a satisfactory territory. Perhaps the struggle to find 'exact' meaning in some of the synthetic expressions we use is akin to looking at the 'triangle' diagram – each part is correct, but the perspective changes.

All these facts suggest a major fact: the map is the creation of the mapmaker who has projected his own 'meaning' into the map, considering his own perceptions, feelings and evaluations. Therefore believing in the map would be an injustice to reality, as Korzybski says: 'Map is not the territory.' The problems arising from the distorted relationships between the maps and the territories can be solved if this is understood. The formation of meaning is based on perception of the mapmaker and is executed by language. Therefore language, according to Korzybski, is a 'map' that attempts to define the territory, and in doing so, limits it. Whereas a person reacts 'as-a-whole' in a situation, our language structure leads us to think and speak 'elementalistically', as Korzybski would say, in terms of thoughts and feelings and actions. Therefore we create symbols, including words, then we tend to deal in 'word magic', to confuse the words with the things or relationships they represent. We pin on labels -- like 'failure' or 'militant' -- and react to these maps as though they were the territories. In this way we may generate self-fulfilling prophecies.

This does not mean that we should stop using language. Language has a life of its own, as it were, and it is not so much the traps in language that are the problem, as it is our ignorance of them. But there are some things we can do; we can work much more effectively with language if we become more aware of what we and others are doing when we use words and other symbols to communicate. We should regard 'communicating' as a process in which the speaker and listener, or writer and reader, constantly fight against the forces of confusion. Therefore we should expect to be misunderstood and to misunderstand others.

This rather different approach to communicating is very difficult to be achieved, as our language is an integral part of ourselves. It is 'built into' our nervous systems from infancy and we may be as little aware of it as we are of breathing. The process of making sense of our surroundings is complex and creative, involving seeing, hearing, etc., and actively relating these stimuli to memories held in some way in our 'brains' and 'bodies'. In fact, the age-old Aristotelian system has kept civilization at a very primary level of thinking, as Korzybski says:

[page 62] The present analysis shows that, under the all-pervading aristotelianism in daily life, asymmetrical relations, and thus structure and order, have been impossible, and so we have been *linguistically* prevented from supplying the potentially 'rational' being with the means for rationality. This has resulted in a semi-human so-called 'civilization', based on our copying animals in our nervous process, which, by necessity, involves us in arrested development or regression, and, in general, disturbances of some sort.

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Our 'word associations' and our tendency to 'identify words with things' are integral with the processes of perceiving, thinking, judging, etc. Bringing about new orientations to 'linguaging' and evaluating must therefore be an active pursuit, in which a person becomes aware of how he is performing now and has an opportunity to change. There is an important phase of unlearning to be gone through before new behaviour can develop. For most people, this 're-orientation' is very difficult or impossible to achieve by reading articles and books (including *Science And Sanity*) or being 'talked at' in lectures . It requires participation in activities -- for example, working with visual perception exercises; discovering and examining our processes of making assumptions and inferences, again by exercises; learning about map/territory relationships using actual maps; and most of all by associative free discussion in a group of fellow explorers, facilitated by a leader who is sensitive to the sometimes radically different viewpoints that emerge and that provide learning opportunities for all . General semantics provides various simple but effective devices and processes to help in this learning. The effects of the various experiences are cumulative, and 'meaning' often cannot be assigned to events until subsequent happenings enable that individual to complete a pattern or gestalt.

## Conclusion

'Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991).

Thus, as Foucault points out, power is constituted through established forms of evidences of knowledge, scientific understanding and accepted assumptions of 'truth'. Therefore he urges for the re-examination of evidences and assumptions. He believes in anti-establishment and objects to vanguardism; instead he argues for many struggles by women, prisoners, conscripted soldiers, hospital patients, and homosexuals against the particularised power, the constraints and controls, that are exerted over them. These movements are linked to the revolutionary movement of the proletariat to the extent that they fight against the controls and constraints which serve the same system of power. 'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from



everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure (Foucault 1998: 63). Instead it is a kind of 'metapower' or 'regime of truth' that pervades society, and which is in constant flux and negotiation.

Just as Foucault challenges the idea that power is wielded by people or groups by way of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive, Korzybski argued that human knowledge of the world is limited both by the human nervous system and the languages humans have developed, and thus no one can have direct access to reality, given that the most we can know is that which is filtered through the brain's responses to reality. Therefore whatever is considered as reality is actually a 'map'; and 'Map is not the territory' according to Korzybski. While the traditional thinking evaluates everything in terms of polar opposites such as 'in' or 'out' and 'win' or 'lose', Korzybski puts forth the new thinking that suggests that the world is frequently about 'gradations', about probabilities and about degrees of intensity, in which there are 'fields of influence' and interrelationships that cannot be suggested fully by language.

It can be concluded that Alfred Korzybski and Michel Foucault have challenged the conventional forms of knowledge and reality by re-examination of evidences and assumptions. They have refused to accept 'map' or 'power' as 'accepted forms' and have rather urged for a more comprehensive understanding of the monolithic and vast 'truth'.

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