



# Influence of Foucault's Biopower in Camus' *The Stranger*

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## Abstract

Power is everywhere and its influence is on everything. Sometimes it works explicitly through laws and justice while other times it works implicitly. In the present era, Foucault has expressed power's hegemonic influence on human body and population. Controlling the mass helps power to implicitly control them for its own benefits of capitalistic advancement. Repression makes people blindly follow power until it becomes hegemonic. But this mechanistic following of rules makes people more docile and subjugated. They lose the meaning of their life. In Camus' *The Stranger*, we see this hegemonic repression of power which makes the characters' action meaningless until the protagonist, Meursault, revolts implicitly by his actions and breaks free of the influence of power through death, over which Foucault says power has no control.

Keywords: Biopower, repression, conjugal family, confession, resistance, punishment, death.

I mistrust all systematizers and I avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity.

— (*Twilight of the Idols*, part 2, sec 26)

Michel Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality* mentioned that body was considered as machine which served as "an anatomo-politics of the human body". Human body was made to optimize its capabilities in such a way that it would both increase its usefulness while at the same time remaining passive to the forces of power. Foucault said that "the body imbued with the mechanics of life" and served as the basis of "the biological

processes" brought under control of the power through interventions which Foucault called "a biopolitics of the population".

This bio-power, as Foucault considered it, had an "indispensable right of Death and Power over Life". Only through biopower's control over life and death could it initiate the development of capitalism, with controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. (Foucault, 1978, p 141)

According to Foucault there was "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques" for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of "biopower".

This effect of biopwer can be used to interpret the meaningless life of the characters in Albert Camus', *The Stranger*. Where the power disguised as law tries to control and subjugate the lives of the characters. Meursault the main protagonist of the book, unknowingly, under the influence of the meaninglessness of life brought about by docile following of rules, breaks restrictions, to bring about his own individuality and freedom through death.

Foucault, in his book *The History of Sexuality*, says that power has no understanding of the "right" to life, to one's body". It cannot comprehend "the right to rediscover what one is and all that one can be". It imposes total control over human body and capacities so that power's control stays unchallenged.

But under all these regulations and law, people were becoming more and more docile and consequently uncaring. More and more existential crisis was creeping in. Under repression, life was becoming meaningless. At the beginning of Camus' *The Stranger*, Meursault does not yet knowingly challenge all the restrictions that society hands out to him. He goes through his life in an unconscious, mechanistic way following a ready-made structure that his society has paved for him. But meek shall not inherit the earth. These repressions will be overturned. People will protest against their meaningless lives.

In *The Stranger*, when Meursault's boss offers him a position in a new office in Paris, Meursault replies that it is all the same to him, and his boss becomes angry at his lack of ambition. Meursault in refusing the offer is indirectly speaking out against power's lure of economical opportunities and his constructing his way to liberation.

Foucault stated that repression might be the link which is common between power, knowledge and sexuality. And if we have to free ourselves from repression we will have to go through considerable efforts. Foucault says that in order to get rid of these repressions there must be nothing less than,

transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, an eruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power. (Foucault, 1978, p 5)

Only when Meursault acts against codes of conduct by maintaining his own individuality in the funeral of his mother; acting against law, which tries to make him confess things by which power tries to restrict him; lifting prohibitions which he thinks is meaningless, does he act out against the repressions of power and control of the state.

Foucault says that since the eighteenth century the family has become "an obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love." There has been set rules of conducts which an individual has to follow in relation to family and existence in the "civil" society. But actually these obligatory rules has been set by power to control the common mass and their roles and actions in the society and to shun any sort of abnormality or aberrations which can threaten power's position in the society. There is a fine balance which is considered normal according to power. Too much love will be considered Oedipus complex, while too less will be considered insensitive. Under control of power of the human body as mechanical, it is not really a surprise that human emotions were also being docile and subjugated. Power focuses more on economic utility of the body than emotional.

Hence Meursault's accusation of his mother being put in the home unjustly was again an injustice and a repression. His only mistake was that he did not follow the rules set by power mindlessly. Power threatens people who do not follow its rule and Meursault is no exception. When Meursault arrives at the old persons' home, he meets with the director who assures Meursault that he should not feel bad for having sent his mother there. The director asserts that it was the best decision Meursault could have made, given his modest salary: "And the truth of the matter is, she was happier here."

Meursault is twice offered to open the sealed casket to see his mother for one last time, but Meursault tells them not to bother. What Meursault does heinous is his refusal to follow the rules of civil society, maybe consciously or just due to lack of emotions brought about by the mechanical roles urged in the human body. And that certainly has its consequences.

At the court room trial, he is accused of keeping his mother at the old-age home, where apparently she had complained about her stay at that place. He was again accused of having coffee and cigarette. These are some petty accusations which are completely unrelated to the trial. Both the director and caretaker gave into the domination of power and law, so that they themselves did not have to face the same consequences as Meursault. Power's main motive here is the refusal to consider one's individuality which allows it to impose total control over human body through punishments and fear, thus remaining unchallenged.

Foucault, in his book *The History of Sexuality*, considers that the "conventional" family became a means of instrument for political control and economic regulation for the subjugation of the urban proletariat. Power under the pretence of "moralization of the poorer classes", uprooted any sort of abnormality which might threaten its control. Foucault said that abnormals and perverts were tortured under the juridical and medical control, which power said was "for the sake of a general protection of society and the race."

More and more sexual repression came about. According to Foucault only the conjugal family was considered normal with their function of reproduction. Anything which deviated from this conjugal normality, threatening revolution against power, was more and more repressed, until it became completely silent. Power was given to only the legitimate and procreative couple who laid down the law. Any "unproductive sexualities" were made illegal and had to be brought under repression through medical institutions. Total control was levied on human life.

When Marie asked him if he wanted to marry her, he replied that "it didn't make any difference to me and that we could if she wanted to." When Marie asks Meursault if he loves her, he replies that, he "probably didn't love her. She looked sad." Meursault here was going against the rules of power. Unintentionally, due to his emotional crisis brought about by power, he was not succumbing to the prim and proper conjugal life and became an aberration. Marie, on the other hand, thinks he is "peculiar", but decides that she wants to marry him nonetheless. She submits to the rule of conjugal life that she is unable to let go, even when there is no true love present, "Then she said she wondered if she loved me..."

Under the rule of power and repression, women's role became more and more repressive. Ostracized to the fringes of society, women had only the role of idealized matriarchal role or the unrestrained morally lacking jezebel figure which being abnormal had to be brought under control. Raymond tells Meursault that when he

suspected that his mistress was cheating on him, he beat her, and she left him. Raymond is still attracted to his mistress, but wants to punish her for her infidelity by having sex with her and then "he'd spit in her face and throw her out." Power was clearly making people more and more inhumane.

Foucault says that, power formulated numberless family of pervers who were on friendly terms with delinquents and akin to madmen. Meursault was both. He helped Raymond write a fake letter to his mistress and later vouches for Raymond that his mistress was indeed unfaithful. He is a pervert close to a delinquent. He is a madman. His action bears no meaning. His resistance against power and its numerous laws has made him madmen. He shoots the Arab, brother of Raymond's mistress four times without any reason. Foucault says that the acts "contrary to nature" and irregular modes of behavior "successively bore the stamp of moral folly, genital neurosis, "degenerescence," or "physical imbalance." All of these are appropriate for Meursault and they have been repeatedly pronounced by the opponent lawyer throughout his case.

Foucault says that our society continuously talks about resisting the power, how power has forces us to keep silent on so many matters. Yet they "hypocritically" do not actually try to change it or resist against it. When Meursault tells the magistrate that he does not believe in God, Meursault's atheism and indifference to his mother's death implicitly challenges the magistrate's belief in a rational universe controlled by power disguised as order and law. These belief constraints him but he feels liberated. By calling Meursault "Monsieur Antichrist," the magistrate incorporates Meursault into his ordered world view where he is considered evil and needs to suppressed and eliminated, preventing Meursault from undermining his rational structure of belief. The magistrate clearly could not resist the constructions of the power system. Judging Meursault in terms of black and white is just giving into power's construction of world into discriminating binary system: "That was his belief, and if he were ever to doubt it, his life would become meaningless."

Foucault says that, confession was one of the means of power-relation where the subject speaks their internal abnormalities in front of an authority who intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console. Power shows these confessions to be unburdening and liberating. But Foucault says that, "One confesses-or is forced to confess." Once the truth is out, it is manipulated by the authority for the total control of people and punishment of aberrations.

The magistrate, when he waves a crucifix at Meursault, introduces the notion that Meursault and his attitudes represent a threat to society. Meursault was first asked the reason for shooting the Arab dead, but the

magistrate was more interested in knowing whether he believed in god. By repeatedly asking him about his faith in god, he was trying to instill a fear of God in Meursault and once Meursault would give in to the order, the magistrate would manipulate and subjugate him into obedience, "a man must repent and in so doing become like a child whose heart is open and ready to embrace all. Meursault would be forced to follow the rules laid down by the power, to be normal again. But Meursault refused and in the act of refusing the magistrate, he was no more docile but was gaining back his own individuality and making a resistance against the power: "All I care about right now is escaping the machinery of justice."

Foucault, in his book *The History of Sexuality*, says that, "Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence". Truth belongs to freedom and liberation but under the constraints of power truth becomes means of control and repression. The power constitutes a discourse of truth, which Foucault says seems to be "carefully tailored to the requirements of power." Against Meursault's wishes, the chaplain visits and asks why Meursault has refused to see him. In his refusing confession Meursault was going against the restrictions of power. Meursault reasserts his denial of God's existence.

When the chaplain states, "According to him, human justice was nothing and divine justice was everything", Meursault replied back, "that it was the former that had condemned". The chaplain desperately tries to get Meursault to submit to laws of the society; to give up his individuality. But Meursault denies. He has finally embraced the meaninglessness of life imposed by laws and rules and broke free from its restrictions.

Foucault says that where there is power, there is also resistance. But surprising this resistance is also within the power in relation with it. Foucault says that "one is always 'inside' power; there is no 'escaping' it." When Meursault refuses to embrace the power's restrictions and refutes the existence of the god and asserts his own singularity, he gains his own power. Power, which helps him refute the old power. The new power, appearing abnormal, frightens the magistrate who desperately tries to make Meursault confess and accept the old order and power so that his own belief system remain intact.

When someone dares to resist power or tries to "transgress his laws", then power tries to thwart them with punishment. Often this punishment culminates into death. Foucault says that it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it. Thwart the resistance and also form a fear amongst others. In Camus' *The Stranger*, there is no rational explanation for Meursault's murder of the Arab. But the authorities seek to

construct an explanation of their own, which they base on false assumptions. By imposing a rational order on logically unrelated events, the authorities make Meursault appear to be a worse character than he is.

The first time, at the police station, nobody seemed very interested in Meursault's case. A white man killing an Arab was not a big issue for them. At the beginning of the trial his lawyer had assured him that his trial wouldn't last more than two or three days. "Yours isn't the most important case of the session. Right after you, there's a parricide coming up." Even the magistrate had politely informed him that, "due to unforeseen circumstances," his lawyer had been unable to come. Then what had changed. The only change that happened is that the magistrate realized that Meursault was resisting the rules of law and power. He was a threat which had to be subjugated. From courtrooms we are supposed to get a sense of reassurance that truth will always prevail, that we live in a world of reason and order rather than brute power. But that is proved only to be an illusion.

Foucault says that, under the pretense of fostering life, power extended its control over society. But since power was supposed to foster life rather than take it, it became more and more difficult for power to impose capital punishment. But power had to maintain its dominance to thwart resistance. Henceforth capital punishment was imposed

by invoking less the enormity of the crime itself than the monstrosity of the criminal, his incorrigibility, and the safeguard of society. (Foucault, 1978, p 138)

The prosecutor alleges that Meursault's lack of grief over his mother's death threatens the moral basis of society:

But here in this court the wholly negative virtue of tolerance must give way to the sterner but loftier virtue of justice. Especially when the emptiness of a man's heart becomes, as we find it has in this man, an abyss threatening to swallow up society. (Camus, 1988, p 101)

In a moral sense, the prosecutor argues, Meursault is just as guilty as the man who killed his own father. Calling for the death penalty, the prosecutor elaborates that Meursault's actions have paved the way for the man who killed his father, so Meursault must be considered guilty of the other man's crime as well. Foucault says that power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Sometime earlier Meursault's case was deemed petty in front of the patricide, but now he was being accused of being more heinous than the patricide. Since the court has no other reason to punish him its hide its mechanism under other excuses to

promote its acceptability. Meursault is found guilty of premeditated murder and sentenced to death by guillotine.

Foucault says that death is the ultimate way of resisting power. Power has no control over death which remain private and a secret. Death becomes power's limit. "It is not surprising that suicide-once a crime, since it was a way to usurp the power of death."

Meursault realizes for the first time that, "Even there, in that home where lives were fading out, evening was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her." Her death was liberating and so will his. His alienation from society is makes him realize his singularity more. It became his means to escape the law's power. Death provides him the possibility of an escape to freedom. In his heightened state of consciousness prior to his execution, Meursault says that he comes to recognize the "gentle indifference of the world", and his own meaningless existence in this society driven by a brute power. Meursault decides that, like him, the world does not rationally order or control the events of human existence. This thought liberates Meursault, no more living a meek, docile preordained life.

Meursault last wish before the day of his death is that,

For everything to be consummated, for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate. (Camus, 1988, p 123)

In so wishing, Meursault is again trying to refute the control of power. Power works by hiding itself. But Meursault's public hanging will expose the truth to the crowd. It will show the liberating effects of death, from the constraints of power. Only then he will feel "less alone", surrounded by people fighting with him against the restraints of society.

## CONCLUSION

Confronted by a power that is law, everyone is subjugated in front of power, there is no escaping power. Foucault calls power "anti-energy", it only dominates and limits; it renders the subjugated one from doing anything, implementing its control and reign over it. People become more and more docile and subjugated such that "all the modes of domination, submission, and subjugation are ultimately reduced to an effect of obedience." Indeed, power has made life meaningless for characters in *The Stranger* making them docile. From the



beginning, the director of the old age home, the caretaker cannot get rid of the restraints of power. The director at the beginning had mentioned that it was good of Meursault to put his mother in the old-age home, with his meager salary. But in the courtroom, he subjugates to power and gives witness against Meursault. Miriam from the very beginning had an inclination that she was not loved by Meursault, which when confirmed she still wanted to marry him, just because it was a societal rule that has become hegemonic. The magistrate was desperate for Meursault to accept his belief, so that his own hegemonic subjugation to power is maintained.

Unfortunately, when Meursault is not subjugated, power takes control and exterminates the threat. Meursault is given capital punishment. But death wins over power. Alienation brings realization of his own identity to Meursault and he realizes his own freedom. Death becomes a welcoming bargain to shun the control of power.

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