PHL329
1003479050

In "*Society Must Be Defended",* Foucault gives an analysis of history that challenges various preconceptions of 'power', particularly about how it operates in present-day society. One analysis of power views it as a unitary, localized force that subordinates the rest of society in a hierarchical fashion, typically embodied in the figure of a king/monarch that asserts absolute authority and domination over many individuals (i.e., the sovereign model of power). Foucault details a new form of power that better describes the power relations at work in society, that's supposed to move us away from thinking of power as just being about a king and his subject's obedience to him. He makes the claim that power, in recent history, can be understood as being dispersed through a network of relations between institutions, collectives, individuals, or through a manifold of subjugations that function within and throughout the social body **(27)**. To illustrate this contrast between these two models of power, the king's power can be visualized as a force that's generated from the king, flowing towards his subject through a linear causal chain (i.e., starting from his 'order', then successively being passed down through his royal retinue until that power has been applied to its target), whereas this new form of power is not one-directional, causally linear, nor derived from the orders of an individual being/collective. Foucault wards us from regarding power as the mere domination of one group over others, because in a holistic, wide-lensed analysis, power *"is not something that is divided between those who have it and hold it exclusively… power must be analyzed as something that circulates… that functions only when it is part of a chain"* **(29)**. Essentially, power functions through a large chain, a relational network; maintaining between many institutions, collectives, individuals, threading through each node in this network in every direction possible. Individuals are considered the 'relays' in this network because they will both submit to this power and internalize the power-effects through themselves (i.e., by unconsciously reinforcing the practices or systems that subjugate them) **(29)**. By contrast, sovereign power is only exerted on a subject; it can't be said that the subject is complicit in their subjugation in any sense. This new form of power is life-focused because it moves/operates through individuals in a much more invasive manner, targeting the literal biological bodies of people. This is the first focus of this paper – to explore the irreconcilable differences between these two forms of power and the way they differ on a fundamental level. Then, I will mention the apparent paradox that atomic power presents to Foucault's system, arguing that it is not a threat to either the new form of power that Foucault presents nor could it even apply to sovereign power at all.

The power that a king wields is absolute (i.e., limitless), because if it had to submit to rules/regulations, it would undermine the legitimacy of its own power **(26)**. So, a sort of justification is ultimately needed to convince people that one person has the right to execute anyone he pleases. That's why law, or any concept of 'right' was pre-emptively formed around the benefit of the king as a way of securing and legitimizing his own power **(26)**. This is the first feature that can be noted: that on the sovereign model of power, all the institutions, forms, aspects of power are derived from the unitary power of the king/state **(44).** They're 'derived' from the king because as the representative of power, he has the authority to make unilateral decisions and enforce them without consulting external bureaucratic structures. In other words,

power is centralized in the king's hands. As well, sovereign power is always directed through the king's external forces (e.g., through a royal entourage, tax collector, or soldier) to extract things from a subject (e.g., their beating heart, overdue taxes, or land). People have a strictly wealth-and-commodities-generating purpose to the king [cite]. But beyond that, the king leaves people alone in their personal affairs. Another elemental feature to the king's power is his right to take or spare life **(240).** To be precise, the king only actually exercises his power when he decides to actively kill, because otherwise he doesn't interfere much with the interpersonal affairs of people, so letting his subjects live is not a 'true' function of his power per se. In other words, *"the very essence of the right of life and death is actually the right to kill: it is at [that] moment when the sovereign can kill that he exercises his right over life"* **(240).** Death can therefore be thought of as the 'force' of sovereign power. By contrast, the new form of power that Foucault introduces has 'life' as its 'force'. It aims to accentuate life, to prolong its duration, and improve conditions so that people are less sick and disabled. Where the sovereign power was summarized as the right to kill, this new life-focused form of power is the power to intervene in people's lives and make them live **(247).** This is achieved by eliminating the deficiencies, abnormalities, and any foreseeable biological hindrances to life **(245).**

There are two tools by which this is achieved. The first is by disciplinary techniques, which are the concrete practises that target individual bodies, aligning them on a trajectory that will satisfy the aforementioned goal of making bodies ultra-functional and uber-lively **(242).** To properly understand how disciplinary power operates, we must situate it in the network of relations that Foucault thinks composes the social body. Foucault writes that this life-focused form of power *"presuppose[s] a closely meshed grid of material coercions rather than the physical existence of a sovereign"* – meaning that this network of relations is what propels power in part; the nodes that represent the institutions and entities are what constitute power, rather than a single king who has to actively cast his power through his own causal actions **(36).** Conceptualizing this new form of power as a meshed grid/network allows us to understand why surveillance is the new method/technique that allows this grid to function **(32, 36)**. Rather than relying on a king's 'discontinuous' power, this new form of power is more autonomous, continuous, and successful, because it doesn't rely on external agents to physically enforce the subjugations [cite]. That is what makes this new form of power conceptually different – it is detached from the authority of any unitary agent. It relies less on concrete enforcements of that power, whilst proving more maximally efficacious than sovereign power **(36).** This grid/network makes the social body function in a dispersed, simultaneous fashion using disciplinary techniques that keep its individuals in line constantly and consistently.

These disciplinary techniques use norms to set standards for how individuals ought to be like. These codes of normalization are this life-focused-form-of-power's legitimacy **(38).** It involves cultivating shame and abjection in people who understand themselves as being sub-par or needing improvement in their deficient parts. Children's bodies are heavily regulated, down to frequency at which they speak in the classroom, the rate at which they can answer questions or the time it takes them to complete a physical activity. The result of their behaviour always calls for some intervention, either by a praise or training (e.g., making them re-do the classic beep test until they can meet the standard of the class). As a result, their individual bodies become

changed: a year later, that same student may become excellent at beep tests. This body has been reconfigured; its movements altered/transformed to meet the norms and put on track towards a predetermined outcome. This outcome has the teleological aim of increasing/maximizing their productive force. While disciplinary techniques are efficient at affecting and targeting individual bodies regardless of their particular conditions (e.g., irrespective of their status in society or whether they even like beep tests to begin with), there is another technique that this new form of power uses to operate on the population as a whole. It uses different instruments to target the masses of the social body, using forecasts and statistics to monitor and regulate the success of the population in terms of its birth rates, death rates, health, and other measurements pertaining to the longevity of people **(246)**. This is 'biopower'. Its focus is on accentuating life so that disciplinary power can maximize the individuals' capacities **(243).** Biopower also aims to combat a kind of 'death', which isn't exactly the death of a biological body, but rather the death of the working body. This 'death' comes in the form of sicknesses, disabilities that prevent the population from working the full work week, or to their full potential/capacity **(244).** Biopower operates as a regulatory force, akin to the initial momentum exerted by a whip, while the subsequent strike – representative of disciplinary power – directly impacts the body. It takes *"control of life and the biological processes of [the masses] and [ensures] that they are not disciplined, but regularized"* **(247).** A concrete example of the effects of this power is with the rituals of death gradually becoming taboo. Previously, death-rituals would be large public events, whereas now it is a secretive and private event. That is because death *"lies outside the power relationship"* – death is the limit of this new form of power, because once people die, its power suffers a blow. This new form of power needs people alive to establish its reign, whereas the king used death to accentuate, to establish his power over the living **(248).** Thus far I have shown that the new form of power that Foucault proposes is fundamentally at odds with the sovereign model of power. Its targets are different, the methods by which is exerts power is different, and ultimately, they have two opposite focuses: the power over killing on the sovereign side, and the power over life on the biopower's side.

However, Foucault's analysis of power gets complicated when the topic of atomic power comes on the scene. Foucault claims that this paradox that arises at the point where biopower reaches a technological extreme. He says that when we consider atomic power, (which is described as the power to kill millions of people, including one's own state), sovereign power seems to be advancing closer towards biopower, rather than retreating from it as a model of power. Killing millions of people was notoriously ascribed as a feature of the sovereign's power. But then, if biopower had the basic function of improving life, how can it coherently expose its own citizens to the risk of death in such a murderous way by wielding volatile weapons of mass destruction, and still claim that it tries to make people live? So: atomic power is the power to kill others, which seems like sovereign power, but it is also understood as the power to kill itself, which seems neither like sovereign power nor biopower. Foucault writes "*you no longer have a sovereign right that is in excess of biopower, but a biopower that is in excess of sovereign right",* to note that biopower is abandoning its oath to make people live, because it seems to have shifted its focus onto death and making people die **(253-4).** The conundrum is ultimately on whether we truly moved away from the former model of power because if the power of sovereignty is truly on the retreat, and disciplinary/regulatory power is on the advance*, "how will the power to kill*

and the function of murder operate in this technology of power, which takes life as both its object and its objective" **(254).** Although Foucault writes that biopower utilizes racism, or the concept of enemies, and that this can justify the murderous function of the state, this does not explain the killing of its own people.

I don't think that the example of atomic power is as paradoxical as Foucault presents it to be. There is an assumption that's made regarding the utility/purpose of atomic power that is, in my opinion, an oversimplified characterization of atomic power. This assumption attributes a specific aim to atomic power that I don't consider to be an inherent characteristic to it. First, describing atomic power as the power to kill its own nation is only spotlighting the most extreme way that atomic weapons could be used. Wars can also be waged for the sole purpose of watching people die, but it's usually not their aim. There is a certain intention that is essential to wielding power, which is that you can use it in a functional way (i.e., that there are people still around, alive, to witness that power, to be subjected to that power). Wars and violent conflicts always carry the understanding that their own people may die as well (i.e., there's always a probabilistic chance of death for both sides), so there is a weak sense of intentionality there, but this does not imply that it's the primary/strong intention of generals, kings, or states when they start wars. Their main intention is to dominate the other group, and to remain standing as the dominating force.

I think building a virus that is very volatile without a proper working antidote can be better characterized as the suicide-of-one's-own-nation the way Foucault argues. But with atomic power, it has the aim of eliminating the threat, the other state, in maximally efficient ways. I do think that a part of the reason why atomic power is used is less 'about' threatening the lives of their own state, and more focused on eliminating the enemy whilst preserving the life of people in their own state. Sending less people off to war means more working bodies at home – sending nukes with the push of a button is desirable to a state largely because sending 1000 people to battle means 1000 less working people in their state. I'm not suggesting that this aspect establishes a closer relationship between biopower and atomic power than with sovereign power (I acknowledge that if monarchs had access to this technology, they might use it as well), but if Foucault's assertion implies that kings establish/legitimize their power partially through killing, then atomic power, assuming it's not intended for planetary destruction but solely aimed at the enemy, it could be conceived as a tool to safeguard the productive workforce of their own state. It could be seen as preserving life for their own state.

Secondly, reading atomic power as a mass-suicide weapon doesn't even make it a kind of 'power' on Foucault's reading, because there would be no resistance to it at all. Power is partially about the sustained submission and domination relationship between people. It's about asserting power even after the end of the battle **(15).** Kings didn't let the battle be the 'end' in their conflict with the enemy, they let it be the start of a stronger mode of domination over the enemy. But I recognize this is not the most charitable reading of what Foucault meant, I will say that I don't think the example was characterized well and it seemed inconsistent with his definition of power itself. To put my two points concisely: biopower would only be an excess of sovereign power if it truly used death and destruction to enforce its own legitimacy, but atomic

power, if utilized, would more likely be the preferred method of weaponry because it continues the reign of biopower without having to sacrifice the state's own people. And if atomic power can even be read as the self-destruction of the state, it ceases to be about power at all.

Reference List

Foucault, Michel. 2003. Society Must Be Defended. New York: Picador.