An Archaeology of Political Discourse? Evaluating Michel Foucault’s Explanation and Critique of Ideology

David Howarth
University of Essex

The resurgence of interest in the concept of ideology and its empirical application neglects the important contribution of Michel Foucault. Despite Foucault’s epistemological reservations about the concept of ideology, both his archaeological and genealogical writings develop original approaches to the analysis of concrete ideologies. This article evaluates Foucault’s archaeological approach by applying it to the case of Black Consciousness ideology in South Africa. When translated into an appropriate form, archaeology provides a useful set of tools for the analysis of concrete ideologies. However, it should not be taken as a free-standing approach for its employment exposes important methodological and substantive difficulties. Archaeology thus needs to be supplemented by a genealogical investigation of discursive practices and by a post-Marxist theory of hegemony.

Renewed interest in theories of ideology has engendered a variety of new approaches and empirical applications, ranging from psychoanalytic to post-Marxist through to analytical and post-analytical idioms. One absent, though in my view potentially important thinker in this regard is Michel Foucault, even though his different accounts of discourse are viewed with scepticism as to whether they can advance a coherent theory of ideology and ideology critique. Indeed, many are openly hostile. On the face of it this is not surprising, as Foucault raises at least three telling objections to the concept itself. He argues, firstly, that ideology is invariably used ‘in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth’, whereas the crucial distinction is not to be drawn at the level of true or false statements, ‘but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 118). Secondly, he believes that the concept of ideology presupposes a transparent and unified conception of human subjectivity that is either deceived by the operation of ideology, or able to break decisively with false beliefs and attain enlightenment and emancipation, whereas Foucault aims to decentre the subject by showing its dependence on relations and discourses which always precede it. Finally, he claims that ideology is usually placed ‘in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant’, whereas his project is trenchantly anti-reductionist, aiming to describe and chart the functioning of discourse in its distinct materiality and positivity (Foucault, 1980, p. 118).

Nevertheless, in both his archaeological and genealogical writings Foucault is concerned with questions about ideology and ideological systems, and elaborates
concepts and methods for their analysis. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (*AK*) and related essays, which are primarily concerned with issues in the philosophy of the natural and human sciences, he applies his archaeological methods of analysis to the logic and functioning of political ideologies. More explicitly, his later genealogical studies seek to unmask the operation of power by charting the unacknowledged connections between discourses, institutions and mechanisms of domination.

This article assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Foucault’s archaeological approach to the study of ideology by considering its application to the case of Black Consciousness (BC) ideology in South Africa. I argue that when properly adapted archaeology provides a useful methodological device for investigating ideologies such as BC by positing a way of pinpointing and describing the historical rules immanent in the production of discourse. In the case of BC ideology, for example, it enables the production of an alternative account that can demystify three myths informing the dominant interpretations. However, I also demonstrate that its employment exposes important methodological and substantive difficulties. More specifically, Foucault remains ambiguous about the relationship between what he calls discursive and non-discursive practices; cannot reconcile the positivist and critical dimensions of his project; and develops an indeterminate set of rules for the analysis of concrete ideologies.

In the latter part of the article I show that issues concerning the evaluation and critique of ideologies are addressed in Foucault’s later writings. This is not realized by elaborating a special conception of ideology based upon a theory of linguistic representation, alienated subjectivity, capitalist production, or the unconscious structures of the mind (as is the case with Marxist, psychoanalytic and other critical approaches). Indeed, as I have already noted, Foucault harbours serious doubts about the epistemological and ontological status of the concept of ideology. Instead, it is achieved by employing a Nietzschean-inspired method of genealogy to analyse specific configurations of knowledge/power. I conclude by arguing that when articulated with his archaeology, and supplemented by a neo-Gramscian conception of hegemony, Foucault’s work yields a fruitful approach to the analysis and critique of ideologies.4

**Three Myths Surrounding Black Consciousness Ideology**

As this article works from the premise that the ultimate rationale for reading and interpreting theoretical texts is whether or not they can disclose new phenomena for empirical investigation, or illuminate existing social phenomena in different ways, I want to test Foucault’s different approaches to the study of ideology, and my interpretations of them, by applying them to the case of BC ideology in South Africa. This ideology was constructed in the late 1960s and early 1970s by activists associated with the South African Students Organization (SASO) – later to become the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) – and declined in the aftermath of the Soweto uprisings in 1976. The dominant picture of the movement’s discourse suggests that it was an elite-driven, self-obsessed ideology founded on cultural and racial exclusivity – an ‘inverse racism’ as some call it – whose concern with cultural and ‘spiritual’ opposition to the apartheid system did little, if anything, to
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bring about its end. According to this picture, the movement and its ideology was unwilling (or unable) to link up with the black working classes, and it functioned primarily to promote a form of petty-bourgeois nationalism that masked its real capitalist class interests (Hirson, 1979, p. 297; see also Brooks and Brickhill, 1980, pp. 76–80; Callinicos, 1988, pp. 61, 79–80). BC is thus presented as adding nothing new to the existing ideological landscape, and it is classified with other forms of racial separatism as found in the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and in the discourse of American Black Power advocates of that era (Gerhart, 1978, p. 272; Pityana, 1988, p. 9; Sono, 1993, p. 61).

In the main, this picture is formed by two competing theoretical approaches to the study of ideology which, paradoxically, generate complimentary if not identical conclusions. On the one hand, it is a product of what might be called traditional histories of ideas intent on describing the different elements of BC ideology by tracing out their various causal antecedents, with a view to showing how they came to influence the consciousness of key individuals in the movement (see Gerhart, 1978; Karis and Gerhart, 1997). On the other hand, it is a function of Marxist accounts that seek to show the underlying class interests and latent economic determinants of BC discourse (Hirson, 1979).

I argue that an archaeological investigation can alter some of these perceptions by putting into question the three myths, as well as the theoretical presuppositions, which inform the dominant interpretations. It can dispense with what I call the ‘simple reiteration thesis’ in which BC intellectuals just repeated ideological elements derived from the Black Power movement in the United States by showing the plurality of discursive formations that BCM activists drew upon in elaborating their ideology. It can dispel what I shall call the ‘inverse racism thesis’ by showing how its cultural particularism co-existed, and at times was overlaid, by discourses of universal humanism. And finally it can undermine what I name the ‘nullity thesis’ by demonstrating that BC reinvigorated the archive of possible resistance discourses and practices available to those struggling against the Apartheid regime in the 1960s and 1970s.

Elements of an Archaeological Approach

Before substantiating these claims, I shall begin by outlining the archaeological approach with a view to adapting it for the analysis of political ideologies. In AK, Foucault systematizes the results of his earlier research by developing an archaeological ‘method of analysis [of discourse] purged of all anthropologism’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 16), and by articulating the philosophical implications of the ‘death of man’ alluded to in his archaeological descriptions of the human sciences (Foucault, 1970). This method rejects humanist accounts of science and traditional histories of ideas, which he argues are predicated on an originating human subject, and opposes causal explanations of discourse, such as the Marxist search for the material determinants of ideology, as well as the hermeneutical quest to recover the authentic meanings of texts. It also attacks accounts that seek to pinpoint an underlying essence of discursive formations, because they impute an impossible unity to what Foucault views as no more than fragmented sets of statements (Foucault, 1972, pp. 15–16, 138–40).
Instead, Foucault’s staunchly anti-reductionist programme takes discourse to be a positive and existing domain of ‘manifest appearances’ and seeks to describe systems of statements (or discursive formations) produced within a historical ‘field of discursivity’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 47). These statements are the products of discursive practices that are, in turn, governed by historically contingent formation rules. Moreover, these rules are not necessarily available to those subjects enunciating statements; indeed, the practitioners may not necessarily be aware of their existence at all (Foucault, 1970, p. xiv). Differentiating his approach from ‘traditional linguistic analysis’, which investigates the rules according to which licit statements can be made in the present and future, archaeology thus aims at a ‘pure description of discursive events’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 27), that is, the statements which make up historically specific discourses.

By the category of discourse Foucault simply means ‘things said’ or language practiced. It is produced ‘by the difference between what one could say correctly (under the rules of grammar and logic) and what is actually said’ (Foucault, 1991a, p. 63). Discourses, then, are ‘made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 117). More concretely examines, Foucault aims to describe the particular systems of statements that make up our scientific knowledge, and he analyses disciplines such as general grammar, natural history, and the analysis of wealth in the Classical period, or the ‘sciences’ of philology, biology and economics in the modern ‘episteme’ (Foucault, 1972, pp. 31–7; see Howarth, 2000b, pp. 50–5).

Conceived of in these terms, discursive formations comprise four basic elements. These are the objects about which statements are made, the places from which statements are enunciated, the concepts involved in the construction of discourse, and the themes and theories they develop. In keeping with his anti-essentialism, however, Foucault avoids the temptation of defining and unifying discursive formations around a unique set of objects, styles, concepts or themes (Foucault, 1972, pp. 37–8). Instead, he defines them as ‘systems of dispersion’ established by discursive practices, and he proposes to describe the systems and their complex interrelationships (Foucault, 1972, pp. 37, 135–6). In short, Foucault takes the rules that govern the production of statements as his main object of analysis, and examines the way they structure the basic elements of a discourse (Foucault, 1972, p. 38).

Two immediate consequences follow. Firstly, Foucault’s archaeological approach provides an alternative method for conducting the history of ideas. For instance, rather than presuming an ultimate coherence amongst the statements of a discourse, against which contradictions and inconsistencies can be located and reconciled, Foucault proposes simply to chart their occurrence. Secondly, although Foucault notes with concern the multiplication of statements in the modern period, he stresses their essential rarity. This is because they are regulated by a complex system of formation rules, such as the role played by academic disciplines, commentary and the sovereignty of the author, which limit their circulation (Foucault, 1980, p. 52). Thus only some statements count as serious candidates for truth and falsity within an order of discourse, whereas others are excluded by the operation of formation rules that govern a discipline (Foucault, 1980, p. 60).
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Although scientific discourse preoccupies Foucault at this stage of his work, he does raise the vexed question of ideology. He accepts that ideologies represent political interests, but does not believe that they necessarily threaten science or compromise scientific practice, for to do so would be to view science and ideology at the inappropriate levels of abstraction (Foucault, 1972, pp. 184–6). It is to treat them as achieved and functioning systems of ideas, and not as discursive practices structured by formation rules. Hence, sciences and ideologies co-exist in the same discursive formation, and sciences themselves often have ideological expressions. Ideologies are simply a type of discursive practice, co-existing with other practices in a society.

Foucault deploys his archaeological method to the analysis of political ideologies in two ways. In AK, he aims ‘to show whether the political behaviour of a society, a group, or a class is not shot through with a particular, describable discursive practice’, which entails exploring the way in which the objects, enunciative modalities, concepts and strategies of ‘political activity’ are discursively constructed, and then articulated with specific forms of political ‘behaviour, struggles, conflicts, decisions, and tactics’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 194). In later reflections on the relationship between archaeology and a ‘progressive’ political practice, these initial remarks are expanded upon in a different fashion. He now aims to show how scientific discourses can become subject to political practices, and he is concerned to distinguish the kinds of relationships that can be established between science and politics. In so doing, he aims to steer a tertium quid between the view that science is the ground of all other discourses and practices (being the source of true knowledge), and a purely instrumental view in which science is merely the product of certain groups or personages (theoretical humanism), or consists of ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ elements, as determined from a particular political vantage point (for example, ‘bourgeois’ or ‘socialist’ science) (Foucault, 1991a, p. 69).

While Foucault’s latter approach to the discursive analysis of politics opens up a fascinating analysis of the relationship between science and politics, it is too narrowly focussed to be of use in the analysis of concrete political ideologies. On the other hand, his initial suggestions are too tentative and indeterminate. Thus his suggestion that an archaeological account of the development of a ‘revolutionary consciousness’ would ‘try to explain the formation of a discursive practice and a body of revolutionary knowledge that are expressed in behaviour and strategies, which give rise to a theory of society, and which operate the interference and mutual transformation of that behaviour and those strategies’, is hardly helpful for the conduct of meaningful empirical analysis (Foucault, 1972, p. 195).

A further difficulty arises because Foucault never provides a satisfactory explanation of the relationship between what he calls discursive and non-discursive practices. Although he provides a number of contradictory accounts of this relationship, the dominant understanding falls perilously close to a form of linguistic idealism in which discursive practices alone constitute social reality (cf. Visker, 1999, pp. 91–7). In AK, for instance, after dismissing the ‘mistake’ of ‘interrogating the being of madness itself’ and ‘its secret content’, he concludes that ‘mental illness was
constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 32, my emphasis; see also Foucault, 1972, pp. 53–4). This results in the radical, though ultimately indefensible claim that discourses, understood narrowly as systems of statements, bring into existence the very objects they purport to describe and explain, including their institutional and social conditions of possibility. In short, while Foucault is surely correct to stress the way in which objects of inquiry are constructed within specific discursive formations, he goes on to draw the illegitimate conclusion that all objects are the product of linguistic practices, and that their being is exhausted by a particular linguistic representation of them.

In order to offset these difficulties, Foucault has either to weaken his strong ontological claims about the nature of discursive practices, or modify his conception of discourse to include a wider range of social practices. With respect to the analysis of political ideologies, the former strategy would focus the study on patterns of political concepts, and would concentrate on the different configurations of ideas and beliefs that make up our understandings of the political world. The latter strategy, by contrast, would be the one followed by theorists such as Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Louis Althusser (1984), and would require a redefinition of the concept of ideology as one of the social practices that constitutes the identities and worldviews of agents in society. Neither of these options is considered and pursued consistently within the confines of the archaeological approach.

To avoid these limitations we need therefore to transform Foucault’s archaeological machinery into a form appropriate for the analysis of political discourses. This requires a satisfactory working definition of political ideology, and the specification of a more appropriate set of formation rules for its analysis. Without entering into a detailed discussion of different theories of ideology, especially the thorny issue as to whether the concept is either negative/critical or positive/descriptive (see Larrain, 1979, pp. 13–14), I will adopt a relatively neutral position that takes ideologies to refer to ‘systems of political thinking, loose or rigid, deliberate or unintended, through which individuals and groups construct an understanding of the political world they, or those who preoccupy their thoughts, inhabit, and then act on that understanding’ (Freeden, 1996, p. 3). That is to say, I shall adopt a working conception that does not build into the category of ideology an a priori critical dimension, as most Marxist accounts would, but which does accept the mutual interweaving of linguistic and non-linguistic practices in ideological systems.

To analyse these ideological systems archaeologically, so to speak, requires us to translate Foucault’s different components of scientific discourses into appropriate terms. This means that instead of treating the objects of discourse as constructed theoretical objects of inquiry, we should take objects to refer to the particular political goals that proponents of an ideology seek to achieve. In the case of BC, for example, this would focus research on the changing purposes of the movement as manifested in its discourse: the desire to construct a black identity, the flirtation with armed struggle, the aim to overthrow of the apartheid state, all of which figured as objectives in the movement’s history. Similarly, what Foucault calls ‘enunciative modalities’ can be understood as the specific social subjects which are brought into being by the articulation of ideological discourses. In this revised sense, subjectivities are not necessarily qualified to speak by virtue of their insti-
tutional location, expertise or knowledge (although political leaders may share these attributes), but are the function of discourses that literally constitute their political identities. With respect to BC, attention would be directed at the elaboration of an assertive black subjectivity capable of resisting the lures of ‘separate development’ in South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s.

As to the concepts of a discourse, the analysis of political ideologies would operate at two different levels. It would concern, firstly, the abstract concepts that form the doctrinal content of an ideology and, secondly, the concrete signifying structures which constitute the lived experiences of social subjects. Thus it would concentrate on the main ideas of an ideology – notions such as the ‘black soul’, ‘non-racialism’, ‘true humanity’ and ‘being-black-in-the-world’ in BC discourse – as well as the ways in which subjects are recruited and retained by the movement’s propaganda and popular representations (see Mzamane and Howarth, 2000). Finally, the strategies of a discourse would not represent the possible ways of modifying a corpus of scientific statements, but would refer to the linking together of different ideological practices so as to interpellate subjectivities and achieve the goals set out in the ideology. I shall now apply this modified version of Foucault’s archaeology to demystify the three myths I delineated when introducing the case of BC, after which I assess its overall viability and desirability as a form of ideology critique.

The Three Myths of Black Consciousness Contested

An archaeological investigation of any concrete political ideology must begin by pinpointing and describing the archive of discursive practices, which collectively form the ‘surfaces of emergence’ of a discourse, that is, ‘the general system of the formation and transformation of statements’ existing in a given conjuncture (Foucault, 1972, p. 130). With respect to BC discourse, the archaeologist must therefore examine the ideological elements that were available to its organic intellectuals and activists when elaborating their discourse. BC leaders were in the lucky position to be able to draw upon a relatively rich archive of external and internal ideological discourses. Indeed, it is possible to isolate six discursive formations that were articulated together by BC intellectuals. External discourses included the ‘Black Power’ movement (and to a lesser extent the discursive practices of the civil rights movement) in the United States,8 the languages of Third Worldism and Pan-Africanism,9 which had emerged during the process of decolonization, and certain philosophical and theological traditions the students had been exposed to in their university studies and religious activities (Cone, 1969; see Halisi, 1991, pp. 107–9). The internal discourses included the Africanist philosophy of the ANC Youth League and the PAC, the writings of white radicals such as Rick Turner (Turner, 1978), and those associated with the more radicalized sections of established churches.

The mere enumeration of the different discursive practices incorporated by BCM intellectuals begs questions of what I have termed the ‘simple reiteration thesis’, namely the mere repetition of already existing ideological elements, though it is insufficient to dispel the argument that one of these elements was so dominant that it constituted the only organizing principle of the new discourse. In order to offset this objection it is necessary to show the effects of more than one discursive
practice on the constitution and functioning of the discourse. This is evident if we turn to the ‘inverse racism thesis’ for here it is clear that if there are tendencies to a form of cultural particularism in BC discourse, there are other logics that comp lexify this reading. For instance, in Steve Biko’s enunciation of the basic tenets of BC philosophy in the early 1970s, he attacks white liberals as part of a wider onslaught against white racism. He criticizes ‘that bunch of do-gooders that goes under all sorts of names – liberals, leftists, etc’ – for abjuring their responsibility for ‘white racism and the country’s “inhumanity to the black man”’, and for believing that they ‘should be jointly involved in the black man’s struggle for a place in the sun’ (Biko, 1970, p. 15).

This attack produces statements that suggest the emergent philosophy is a form of radical cultural particularism, even an inverse racism, as Biko strives to define a black identity by establishing a binary opposition between black/African and white/European societies. For instance, he extols his own ‘African culture’ for being ‘a man-centred society’ and attacks ‘the Westerner’s culture’ for its crude instrumentalism and individualism, which is the ‘hallmark of the capitalist approach’ (Biko, 1972, pp. 78–9). Moreover, he explicitly rejects liberal projects of racial integration as the solution to apartheid domination. He argues that the liberal ‘myth of integration’ must be opposed ‘because it makes people believe that something is being done when in reality the artificially integrated circles are soporific to the blacks while salving the consciences of the guilt-stricken white’ (Biko, 1978, p. 55). In short, liberal integration ‘works from the false premise that, because it is difficult to bring people from different races together in this country, achievement of this is in itself a step towards the total liberation of the blacks’ (Biko, 1978, p. 55).

At the same time, however, Biko is at pains to stress the desire for a universal humanism as the ultimate goal of BC ideology. In his important essay ‘Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity’, he argues that ‘We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face’ (Biko, 1973, p. 47). At times, this universal humanism is presented in dialectical terms, in which white racism and black consciousness are the thesis and antithesis respectively, and the synthesis ‘a true humanity where power politics will have no place’ (Biko, 1973, p. 39, my emphasis; see also Biko, 1978b, p. 332).

From an archaeological point of view, these contradictory statements are not to be taken as evidence of the discourse’s inner incoherence and irrationality, which must be explained away or demystified by reference to some underlying essence of the ideology (Foucault, 1972, pp. 149–56). Rather, they have to be described as statements that appear in the discourse, and they must be accounted for by reference to the different rules of discursive practice that BC activists followed when making statements. That is to say, from an archaeological perspective, questions of truth and rationality are bracketed in favour of the description of the appearance of statements, and an account of the sets of rules that serve as their conditions of existence (although it should be noted that Foucault’s approach does not explain
the way in which contradictory statements and elements are covered over by various rhetorical and performative operations in a successfully functioning ideology, nor how they can serve to undermine and subvert the functioning of an ideology by being made visible).

A similar argument can be made with respect to the apparent contradictions between ‘Africanism’ and ‘blackness’ evident in debates about ‘liberation theology’, as well as the debates within the movement between those favouring a class analysis of the apartheid system and those that prioritized a racial characterization of the apartheid order (see Thoalane, 1976). In both these cases, the opposing statements are compatible with different discursive rules structuring the production of statements by differently positioned social subjects within the discourse. For instance, those who stressed an African theology were drawing on the Africanist philosophy of Anton Lembede, Robert Sobukwe and others, while reactivating indigenous religious practices and discourses, whereas those who stressed the need for a ‘Black theology’ were shaped principally by debates in the United States. Equally, these statements co-existed with other statements commensurate with ‘established’ religious discourses, such as the Catholic and Anglican churches.

Let us turn, finally, to the ‘nullity thesis’. One way of demystifying this myth would be to demonstrate the positive contribution that the movement made to the overthrowing of the Apartheid regime by virtue of the new political leadership it fostered, the political frontiers it helped establish, as well as the ideology of assertiveness that partly stimulated and sustained the Soweto uprisings. I believe that this positive contribution can be sustained (cf. Fatton, 1986, p. 36). However, these are primarily empirical questions about the movement’s overall efficacy and impact, and do not therefore fall within the remit of this particular article. Instead, it is important to show via archaeological analysis that BC discourse contributed new discursive articulations and possibilities to the overall archive of resistance discourse in post-Sharpeville South Africa. In this respect, it is possible to show that the stress placed on questions of ‘self-help’, the turn to local community organizations as the basis for long-term collective action, and the stress on black assertiveness, reinvigorated the repertoire of resistance practices and transformed the ideology of ‘non-racialism’, which came to predominate in the post-Soweto context (Matiwane and Walters, 1986).

A Remaining Ambiguity

Thus far I have shown the added value a modified archaeological approach can contribute to the understanding of an ideology such as BC in South Africa. Nevertheless, there is a remaining difficulty in employing Foucault’s initial approach to analyse and evaluate political discourses. As I have suggested, Foucault’s archaeology of discourse, whether scientific or political, aims merely to describe the appearance of statements and their relations with other statements both within and between discursive formations. However, he also seeks to provide a critique of the constraints and exclusionary mechanisms at work in the production and legitimation of discourse.

This ambiguity goes to the heart of Foucault’s archaeological enterprise and the principles that inform it. The dominant line of the project suspends questions about
the meaning and truth of the statements, and seeks simply to describe statements by excavating the formation rules that govern their production. For instance, he rejects any hermeneutical impulse to interpret the meaning and truth of statements by arguing that

To interpret is a way of reacting to enunciative poverty, and to compensate for it by a multiplication of meaning ... But to analyse a discursive formation is to seek the law of that poverty ... and to determine its specific form. In one sense, therefore, it is to weigh the ‘value’ of statements. A value that is not determined by their truth, that is not gauged by the presence of secret content; but which characterizes their place, their capacity for circulation and exchange, their possibility of transformation, not only in the economy of discourse, but, more generally, in the administration of scarce resources (Foucault, 1972, p. 120).

On the other hand, as against this equation of statements as meaningless elements in an economic exchange, there are other passages in which Foucault is apparently concerned with the meaning and truth of statements. For instance, he claims that Gregor Mendel’s statements were not taken seriously by his fellow botanists and biologists in the nineteenth century because he was not ‘in the true’, that is, ‘he was speaking of objects, applying methods, and placing himself on a theoretical horizon which were alien to the biology of his time’ (Foucault, 1981, pp. 60–1). And he concludes that ‘[w]ithin its own limits, each discipline recognizes true and false propositions; but ... pushes back a whole teratology of knowledge beyond its margins.’ This means that ‘there are no errors in the strict sense, for error can only arise and be decided inside a definite practice’, and that ‘it is always possible that one might speak the truth in the space of a wild exteriority’ (Foucault, 1981, pp. 60–1 my emphasis). From this perspective, as Linda Alcoff correctly notes, Foucault is committed to demarcating at least three types of statements: meaningful and true (‘Mars is the fourth planet’); meaningful and false (‘Mars is the fifth planet’); and meaningless (‘Mars is angry’) (Alcoff, 1996, p. 124).10

This important undecidability in Foucault’s texts has a number of repercussions for his approach. To begin with, Foucault’s decision to suspend the truth and meaning of statements in favour of a purely descriptive enterprise may serve the useful heuristic role of allowing a synchronic account of political discourses to be executed with a minimum of prejudice. However, if taken as a strict methodological rule it jeopardizes the entire enterprise for without understanding the meaning of the statements produced it is not easy to see how one would begin the descriptive enterprise in the first place (cf. Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, p. 88). Furthermore, it is difficult to see how Foucault could adopt the critical perspective he wishes to take toward the exclusionary mechanisms he pinpoints without presupposing an alternative perspective with which to evaluate the truth and falsity of statements, as well as the logics that regulate their production. Indeed, Foucault provides no justification for his desire to separate the descriptive and evaluative dimensions of archaeology, apart from peddling a reductionist positivism in which ‘discursive events’ are simply understood as facts devoid of meaning and value.11

These problems are evident if we return to the example of BC. In describing and charting the production of statements made in the name of this ideology, the
archaeological analyst must understand the meaning of the statements she describes in order that they might be said to count as statements of BC discourse. Moreover, there can be no question of simply describing the appearance of statements, as any such description would be part of an overall argument about the character and impact of the discourse itself. Indeed, in challenging existing interpretations for the myths they have helped establish and propagate, the whole point would be to articulate an alternative account of the discourse, which is asserted to be both more plausible and perspicuous than those available. Such an account would have to arrange the facts about BC discourse in a way that would provide a more convincing picture of its logic and character, and would strive to situate the discourse in a historical context that would result in a more comprehensive explanation of its emergence and effects. In short, insofar as the interpretations that are contested inevitably take a stance on the truth or falsity of the beliefs and values of BC, as well as its nature and impact in the South African context, so too must a viable alternative. This presupposes an evaluation of meaningful statements and concomitantly a minimum degree of normativity.

The root cause of these difficulties resides with Foucault’s notion of formation rules. Despite its centrality, he never provides a satisfactory definition of this notion, and its difference from concepts such as ‘system’, ‘practice’, ‘law’, ‘structure’ and ‘regularity’, which he also deploys (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 80). In fact, he tends to use the terms synonymously, since one of his objectives is to emphasize the immanent relationship between the system of formation rules, the discursive practices they inform, and the resulting discursive structures (Howarth, 2000b, p. 62). However, this raises a number of problems. The first concerns the precise character and status of the rules themselves. Here Foucault variously understands rules to be either empirical regularities inferred from the statements of established discourses, or prescriptions as to what can and cannot be stated in a given discourse, or causes of the orders of discourse themselves (cf. Foucault, 1972, pp. 72–4, 116–8). Foucault thus conflates the idea that rules correspond to the empirical regularities between statements, on the one hand, with normative and causal conceptions of rule-following on the other. Not only do the causal and normative conceptions contravene his archaeological method, which is predicated on ‘a pure description of the facts of discourse’, they either hypostatize rules by making them the underlying determinants of practices, or they presuppose a conscious subject capable of applying rules correctly or incorrectly (Foucault 1998, p. 306; see also Foucault 1972, p. 131).

Secondly, it is not clear how Foucault generates the rules that underpin discursive formations. Are they retroactive empirical generalizations inferred from the particular statements of a discourse, or are they deduced from the specific logics and rules governing a particular episteme? This methodological query adds further doubts about the status of archaeology as critique. That is to say, while the former conception is consonant with a purely descriptive enterprise (though rendering critique all but impossible), the latter makes critique possible but attributes a false causal power to formation rules. Foucault’s archaeological project thus posits, on the one hand, a transcendental set of formation rules and, on the other, a contingent series of empirical statements; splits the role of the archaeologist into being either a detached observer or involved critic; and ascribes an origin in the form of epistemes to what he regards as historically specific discursive formations. In short,
he replicates the negative characteristics of the modern episteme – the famous ‘doubling of man’ inaugurated by Kantian philosophy – which he is at pains to contest in elaborating the archaeological project (see Foucault, 1970, pp. 303–43).

The Genealogical Turn

Paradoxically, Foucault never employed archaeology’s ‘panoply of terms’ to engage in further empirical research (Foucault, 1972, p. 199). His turn to a Nietzschean inspired method of genealogy and then to what he calls the problematization of practices seeks instead to address some of the weaknesses of his earlier writings (Foucault, 1980, pp. 64; 83–5, 196–7; Foucault, 1985, pp. 11–13). However, he does not dismiss archaeology, as the delimitation of research objects through archaeological ‘bracketing’ becomes an integral part of genealogy, and the two methods are combined to form what Foucault calls ‘problematization’. In the rest of the article I shall outline genealogy via a comparison with archaeology, before assessing the merits of his revised approach to the study of ideology.

Foucault’s genealogy continues his attack on the need to locate for ‘ideal significations and indefinite teleologies’ in historical research (Foucault, 1984a, p. 77). Rejecting the inquiry into for underlying origins, he focuses on the ‘ignoble beginnings’ of social phenomena by investigating the unpredictable events that constitute entities, and by stressing the clash of political forces – the ‘play of dominations’ – in crucial historical conjunctures. Moreover, while traditional historians take history to be an objective process distinct from the historian’s gaze, genealogy is committed to a thoroughgoing perspectivalism in which events are perceived from the particular point of view of a ‘situated’ researcher. Foucault’s ‘effective history’ thus entails a radical historicization of processes, institutions and practices, such that ‘[n]othing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men’ (Foucault, 1984a, pp. 87–8).

This change of perspective gives rise to a series of contrasts between Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical methods. Firstly, whereas the archaeologist assumes the role of a detached observer who simply describes discourses, the genealogist diagnoses the problems of contemporary societies by examining their historical emergence, proffers cures, and suggests alternative trajectories of development (Foucault, 1984b, p. 46). Secondly, while the archaeologist endeavours to bracket notions of truth and meaning, the genealogist cannot do so, even though these values are still treated with suspicion and cannot be employed unproblematically in the name of freedom and the critique of power. Instead, as Foucault now puts it, ‘truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power’, but ‘a thing of this world’, which is internally connected to logics of power and domination (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). Finally, while the archaeologist studies discourses synchronically as autonomous rule-governed practices, the genealogist produces ‘a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects’ that necessarily involves the complex interaction of linguistic and non-linguistic practices (Foucault, 1980, p. 117). Genealogy is thus explicitly concerned with the centrality of power and domination in the constitution of discourses, identities and institutions (See Howarth, 2000b, pp. 71–3).
This historicizing, engaged and political approach to the study of ideologies opens up a different set of research questions. In the case of BC it focuses attention on the contingent, ‘ignoble’ emergence of the movement, especially the decision by black students to oppose and eventually break with the non-racial National Union of South African Students in 1967 and form SASO, and it concentrates on the way that certain ideological possibilities, such as the discourse of ‘non-racialism’ as elaborated by the ANC and its allies, were in different conjunctures foreclosed by the decision of the BCM to articulate a ‘blacks only’ organizational infrastructure (see Howarth, 2000a). Moreover, the genealogist cannot simply describe the rules and statements of discourse, pointing out for instance their internal contradictions, she must also evaluate the import of these statements together with the practices with which they are connected. Thus with respect to BC critical attention has to be concentrated on the consequences of adopting a ‘blacks only’ strategy of achieving human emancipation in South Africa, as well as the ambiguities of the overall goals that the movement sought to achieve. In sum, the genealogical investigator must seek to discern the meanings of the practices and discourses she investigates, and is then called upon to evaluate the movement’s goals, strategies and *modus operandi*.

**Ideology, Domination and Counter-hegemony**

In retrospect, then, the turn to genealogy tackles some of the problems posed by the archaeological enterprise. It addresses the problem of critique and the involvement of the researcher in describing, evaluating and criticizing practices. Unlike the external role of the archaeologist, the genealogist is internal to the practices she describes and criticizes. However, this internalist position does not render the investigator blind to the possibility that the subject’s self-understandings of the practices she analyses may be partial, misleading or false. Indeed, the role of the genealogist is to draw attention to the way in which dominant discourses conceal the emergence and effects of the practices they sustain. It is only by tracing out the genesis of these discourses and practices, and by contextualizing them in relation to other practices and discourses, that different possibilities excluded by dominant interpretations can be reactivated and possibly pursued. Moreover, the genealogical approach resolves the separation between linguistic and non-linguistic practices by rejecting the idea that discourses are simply autonomous systems of scientific statements, and by stressing the power relations and political forces that form them. As he now puts it, ‘it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 100).

There are, nevertheless, remaining queries about Foucault’s genealogical account of discourse, especially when directed at the analysis of political ideologies. To begin with, there is Foucault’s scepticism about the notion of ideology, and the ‘great model of language (*langue*) and signs’, which he argues underpins it. He refuses, for instance, ‘analyses couched in terms of the symbolic field or the domain of signifying structures’ seeking instead to conduct ‘analyses in terms of the genealogy of relations of force, strategic developments, and tactics’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 114). Now, to some extent these comments reflect Foucault’s over-reaction against the linguistic idealism of his archaeological method, and the structuralist model of lan-
guage from which it borrows, but they do make visible some important differences with standard conceptions of ideology critique. That is to say, while his work is consistent with accounts of ideology developed by theorists such as Althusser and Michel Pêcheux, which focus on the way social and political practices constitute individuals as social subjects with identities, rather than positing them as the essential sources of meaning and agency, he is suspicious of the idea that these practices are necessarily mediated by linguistic representations, or that they function by concealing their true import (see Althusser, 1984; Pêcheux, 1982). Instead, for Foucault practices of domination are visible manifestations of the functioning of power – the famous disciplinary techniques that Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* for instance – which are in need of analysis, exposure and challenge. This unmasking process is achieved, moreover, by constructing genealogies that expose the contingency and historicity of naturalized and sedimented practices, thus insinuating new possibilities for thought and action (see Foucault, 1979, pp. 15–49; Howarth, 2000b, pp. 73–6, 129–30).

A further issue concerns the linking together of different discourses into more global patterns, as well as the general functioning and interaction of political ideologies. On one level, this touches upon the problem noted by a number of critics about the connection between what Foucault calls the ‘microphysics of power’, which operates ‘in the bodies ... of each and every one of us’, and the crystallization of these practices and power relations into relatively sedimented forms of domination and subordination (see Cocks, 1989, pp. 49–51, 79; Honneth, 1991, pp. 74–5; McNay, 1994, p. 111). With respect to relations of domination, Foucault grapples with this problem in his writings on ‘governmentality’, where he adumbrates a suggestive, if not entirely conclusive, account based on the concepts of domination, freedom and power (Foucault, 1991b, pp. 11–3). Here he distinguishes between relatively fixed systems of control that strongly reduce the freedom of the subject, confining it to sedimented positions within a social structure, and the exercise of power, which presupposes a weakening of control, and the emergence of possibilities not evident in the existing structure of domination. This makes possible a certain degree of freedom for social agents both to maintain systems of domination and to propose counter-strategies of resistance. At this level of analysis, any struggle designed to modify existing social relations and to institute a new system of domination will encounter resistance that has to be overcome. This assumes that any drive to create a new system of power will itself be an unstable configuration, always vulnerable to change and transformation.

However, at another level there still remains the difficulty of explaining the ways in which oppositional political ideologies are constituted and function (cf. Said, 1983, p. 221). More particularly, Foucault needs to explain how movements and actors construct counter-hegemonic discourses that can weld together contingent and at times contradictory ideological elements, and he needs to account for the way they can recruit a diverse range of social actors in support of their objectives. That is to say, while Foucault is surely correct to be wary of the dangers of oppositional movements becoming new sources of domination, he seems unwilling to contemplate the elaboration of what Gramsci calls counter-hegemonic projects, which can contest relations of domination, and institute more democratic and egalitarian forms of political rule (see Gramsci, 1971, pp. 229–39).
Foucault’s genealogical account of political discourse thus needs supplementing with a post-Marxist concept of hegemonic practice that enables one to explain the formation of oppositional ideologies by recourse to the establishment of political frontiers necessary for their constitution (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 134–45).

From a post-Marxist perspective, the elaboration of a potentially hegemonic ideology involves the articulation of a common political identity amongst a dispersed set of agencies and subjects. This involves the construction of a set of equivalent relations between different elements by dividing social space into two camps. In turn, the establishment of political frontiers between differently positioned social actors is made possible by the production of ‘empty signifiers’ – signifiers emptied of determinate content – that enable actors with divergent interests and identities to unite together in the face of a common enemy (Laclau, 1996a, pp. 36–47; see Howarth, 2000b, p. 119).

Thus, if we return, finally, to the case of BC, it can be demonstrated that the linking together of a wide range of constituencies with different identities – different ethnic groups (e.g. Zulus, Xhosas, Indians, Coloureds), social classes (for example workers, students, petty-bourgeoisie) and status groups (men and women) – was made possible by the postulation of white racism as a common enemy (see Howarth, 1997). For example, a typical pamphlet distributed by the Black People’s Convention in 1973 after the wildcat strikes by African workers in Natal – labelled by the white media as ‘the Great Zulu strike’ – attacks the idea that there are major ethnic differences (‘African’, ‘Indian’, ‘Coloured’) amongst the black population. In its place, it calls for black solidarity in the face of a common white oppression:

African workers have put out their hands for support from the rest of the black community. But the rest of the black community has not responded positively. We must remember that we are not different from each other [my emphasis] – it is only the white man who makes us feel this way by separating us and paying us different wages. None of us can afford to sit on our backs and say: ‘I don’t want to be involved!’’. Whether we like it or not we are involved, and we are involved together. And it is time that we got together as OPPRESSED people – Africans, Coloureds and Indians – who are affected by APARTHEID, GROUP AREAS, JOB RESERVATION ... the injustices are endless. Our suffering is the same. WE ARE ALL BLACK PEOPLE. (Black People’s Convention, 1973).

In this case, then, the construction of a common black identity defined in opposition to white racism and ‘non-whiteness’ served to conceal or temporarily reconcile differences and contradictions amongst a diverse set of agencies and identities. This enabled the discourse to function as a means of recruiting different individuals by extending its logic to different constituencies and groups. It also enabled the discourse to unify its divergent elements into an articulated whole. In the post-Soweto conjuncture, and the new conditions of political struggle that resulted, these differences and contradictions became more visible, as the existing chains of equivalence began to disintegrate and be replaced by a new ‘non-racial democratic’ opposition discourse (see Howarth, 2000a).
Conclusion

In this article I have argued that while Foucault’s archaeological account of political discourse, when translated into an appropriate form, does provide a useful set of theoretical and methodological tools for the analysis and critique of concrete ideologies, it should not be taken as a free-standing approach. Instead it needs to be supplemented by a genealogical approach to discursive practices and by a post-Marxist account of hegemony. When viewed in these terms, Foucault’s archaeological analysis serves as a necessary structural precursor to the more historically and politically oriented accounts inspired by Nietzsche and Gramsci. In Foucault’s terms, archaeology is an internal moment of the problematization of the discourses and practices investigated, thus providing the means for isolating an object of investigation – the rules forming the objects, subjects, concepts and strategies of a discourse – before the critical genealogical approach accounts for its contingent emergence and formation. The concept of hegemony continues this emphasis on the radical historicization of discourses and social practices by emphasizing the political character of the construction and functioning of ideologies. Interpreted in this way, Foucault’s writings do indeed disclose a space for the description, explanation and critique of political ideologies.

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About the Author

David Howarth, Department of Government, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ, UK; email: davidh@essex.ac.uk

Notes

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1 See Frieden, 1996; Laclau, 1996a, b; Rosen, 1996; Žižek, 1989.
3 These particular criticisms were originally made in 1977, and directed primarily at Marxist theories of ideology (although they hold for all critical and negative conceptions as well). However, they are particularly pertinent in that commentators have construed them as emblematic of Foucault’s views on ideology per se, such that his work is inappropriate for its analysis and critique. As I shall argue, Foucault adopts different (and at times ambiguous) conceptions of ideology in the different phases of his writings, and that all his various theorizations can be employed, when properly clarified, modified and synthesized, for the analysis and critique of political ideologies.

4 It for this reason that I use the terms ideologies, political discourses, and concrete ideologies synonymously in the article. They are distinguished from the critical concept of ideology, as articulated for example in the writings of Marx, Althusser, Barthes and Žižek.
6 For example, an article submitted to a respectable academic journal today must conform to minimum rules of argumentation, logics of inference, presentation of evidence, referencing, style, length, titling, and so on, for it even to be considered a serious candidate for publication. It must then satisfy other rules of suitability, such as originality and appropriateness, for it to be finally published. For a fuller analysis of Foucault’s conceptions of discourse see Howarth (2000b).
7 The latter position is adopted by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and is discussed in more detail below.

10 This position would differ from a purely positivist position in that Foucault’s account of the truth and meaning of statements is always relative to historically specific discursive formations.

11 It is difficult to see how Foucault’s own ordering of the statements he explores in his different studies does not immediately imbue them with a certain meaning and value.

12 It should be stressed here that Foucault is not falling back into a naïve form of realism or even positivism. He still stresses the discursive character of the practices he is analysing as a minimum condition of their intelligibility, but denies the need for a special theory of ideology to explain their functioning and grip. Moreover, while he now separates practices, discourses and institutions for analytical purposes, he insists they are connected together in relational ensembles, which he labels apparatuses or ‘dispositifs’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 194).

References


