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Q1(d)

Foucault's concept of power.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · PSIR GS 1 · 10 marks · Concept of power, hegemony, ideology and legitimacy.

Concept of power, hegemony, ideology and legitimacy.

Core demand of the question

- **Comment on the following in about 150 words:** Foucault's concept of power. (10 marks)

Revision summary

Foucault treats power as productive relations that form subjects through discipline and the government of populations.

The concept goes beyond Hobbes's sovereign sword and Dahl's A-over-B decisions.

Power and knowledge work together in prisons, clinics, schools, and statistics.

Resistance is inside power relations, not a pure exterior.

The account describes how people are governed; it does not by itself say which government is just.

Introduction

Michel Foucault treats power as a relation that produces conduct, knowledge, and subjects, not only as a stock of force held by a sovereign. The concept is meant to study how people are governed in prisons, clinics, schools, and statistics, as well as in law.

Body**Against the sovereign map**

- Hobbes located power in a common sword. Dahl located it in A getting B to do what B would not otherwise do.
- Foucault does not deny those maps. He says they miss capillary power that runs through routines and classifications.
- Disciplinary power trains bodies in time-tables, exams, and surveillance, as in Discipline and Punish.
- Bio-power governs populations through birth, health, and security, as in the lectures on governmentality.
- **Power and knowledge work together:** a science of crime or sexuality is already a way of ruling.

What power is, on this view

- Power is productive. It makes kinds of persons (the delinquent, the patient, the citizen) rather than only forbidding acts.
- Power is relational and mobile. It is exercised, not owned as a thing.

- Resistance is internal to power relations; it is not a pure outside.
- The state remains important as a cluster of these relations, not as the only seat of power.

Use and limit

- The concept explains why rights on paper can coexist with disciplinary institutions, a point relevant to prison and asylum jurisprudence under **Article 21**.
- **It does not replace Rawls or Mill on justification:** Foucault describes how subjects are formed, he does not give a full theory of when power is legitimate.
- Read with **Easton**, allocation still happens; Foucault asks through which knowledge and bodies it happens.

Flow diagram

Foucault power -> Disciplinary
Foucault power -> Bio-power
Foucault power -> Power-knowledge
Hobbes Dahl -> Sovereign and decisions
Foucault power -> Not only the sword

Conclusion

Foucault's concept of power is productive, capillary, and joined to knowledge. It extends Hobbes's sword and Dahl's decisions into discipline and bio-power. It is a method for studying government, not a complete theory of justice.

Facts & figures

Discipline and Punish, 1975

Studies the prison as a site of disciplinary power: surveillance, examination, and the training of bodies.

Bio-power

Foucault's term for the government of populations through health, birth, and security.

Dahl

Behavioural power as A getting B to act otherwise; Foucault treats this as one face, not the whole.

Article 21

Indian cases on prisoners and asylums show legal rights meeting disciplinary institutions, the kind of site Foucault studied.