Foucault and American Foreign Policy During 2001 Bush Era

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In this paper I discuss the theory of power structures written by Michel Foucault in “Docile Bodies: Discipline”¹ and relate this to George Bush’s Foreign policy agenda (roughly around 2001) in accordance with the Cheney Report described by Michael Klare in his book “Blood and Oil.” Foucault was a popular 20th century social theorist and Michael Klare is a college professor and journalist.

First I explain Foucault’s theory of power structure and how this structure both disciplines actions by US leaders as well as the US population. Then I describe Klare’s rendition of foreign policy related to the Cheney report. Finally I link these ideas together to enhance my thesis: Bush was disciplined in a power structure that did not allow him to alter American foreign policy, which had securitization of oil as a main focus, while our society remained stuck in its own oil power structure unable to alter consumption patterns and norms related to the American way of life.

A common error concerning the relationship between US politics and foreign policy are normative statements that don’t consider power structures, or positions held and maintained in a society that make it very difficult to veer from the norm. For example people often say: “bring our troops home,” but repercussions specifically concerning how that might affect their own lives are overlooked, such as surging transportation prices that threaten to stagnate the entire U.S. economy.

Arguing for these foreign policy alterations fail to account for societal power structures and, more importantly, that leaders are even more inclined to remain passive and inert in their power structures. Bush could only continue to expand the foreign policy dictated by his predecessors, including U.S. presence in the Middle East, because he was disciplined as such and trapped in a power structure during his presidency.

Foucault describes power structures as dependent on society, annexed and enhanced by the state apparatus, and completely built into each person’s life. In other words, from primary school through University level education and through professional life, citizens remain trapped in a power structure that does not allow for the “abnormal” but only what is the “normal.” Power structures and discipline teach society, and each individual, what course of action is normal, or to be sought after, and what is abnormal, or to be avoided. In this sense the abnormal remains until it transforms by popular consent to the normal. For example the idea that smoking cigarettes is bad for you is presently the normal discipline while during the greater part of the 20th century this notion was considered abnormal.

Structures of power within a society can only exist with immense discipline on the human body, hence Foucault’s fitting title of this section “Docile Bodies.” Society disciplines the student, soldier, or factory-worker their entire life. From discipline emerge four techniques: the ability to draw tables, to prescribe movements, impose exercises, and to arrange tactics.² Foucault considers the latter technique, ‘tactics,’ “the highest form of disciplinary practice.”³ Foucault also alludes to military discipline as the pillar of society,

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¹ Excerpt from Michel Foucault’s “Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,” 1975.
² (Foucault, 1975: 167)
³ (ibid)
protecting law and the state apparatus.

American foreign policy in 2001 and immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks was loosely based on pertinent information yielded by the National Energy Policy Development Group (NEPDG), which released National Energy Policy during 2001, informally known as the Cheney Report.\textsuperscript{4} The report focuses on promoting domestic energy and states “US national energy security depends on sufficient energy supplies to support US and global economic growth”\textsuperscript{5} and thus confirms that the Bush Administration must “make energy security a priority of [its] trade and foreign policy.”\textsuperscript{6} This statement equates national security with energy security and, subsequently, the security of the nation’s economy and society in general.

Taking the NEP report at face value, Bush had little choice but to both heed to the report’s logical, or tactical, advice and follow the path his predecessors had taken—stemming from FDR’s presidency. It was thus “normal” for a well-disciplined George W. Bush to follow tactics that would “bolster our ties with oil-rich countries and expand our presence in key producing areas.”\textsuperscript{7} Therefore Bush’s insistence on securing US energy encompassed economic and social security for American’s because it was seen that the American way of life could not be altered very easily; Bush’s power structure led to tactical foreign policy decisions based on energy security because the American public was inherently trapped in its oil power structure.\textsuperscript{8} Considering Bush was the Commander in Chief, disciplined by society, his actions and tactics as president are not all that surprising. He thus correctly followed his most pertinent command to outline the most effective tactics in order to maintain order in the nation.

The Cheney report strongly considers the factors, or power structures, driving foreign policy: the American need for increasing amounts of energy. Clearly this demand cannot be satisfied by domestic sources, therefore the report notes that in order to satisfy American oil consumption demand “the major Persian Gulf oil producers…will have to double their total daily output between 2001 and 2025.”\textsuperscript{9} This is tactical, logical, and disciplined policy analysis, utilizing military power for its means and the securitization of energy as its ends, to meet American demand.

Bush foreshadowed the report by making a statement in March of 2001: “‘The reality is, the nation has got a problem when it comes to energy […]. We need more sources of energy.’”\textsuperscript{10} Here Bush clearly recognizes the American oil addiction, or national oil power structure, and the fact that this consumption pattern will not miraculously change overnight due to its inherent power structure. The American way of life, consuming massive quantities of oil, is taken as “normal.” One could not argue this statement is false or misleading, it is a simple representation of the fact: “Our future

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{4} (Klare, 2004: 62)
  \item \textsuperscript{5} (ibid)
  \item \textsuperscript{6} (ibid)
  \item \textsuperscript{7} (ibid)
  \item \textsuperscript{8} “And like his predecessors in the White House, Bush recognized the critical role petroleum plays in driving the American economy and thus was reluctant to do anything that would diminish it. He understood that shifting to other sources of energy would entail a change in lifestyle that the American public might not easily accept, and was unwilling to take the political risk. And so he chose the path of least resistance” (ibid).
  \item \textsuperscript{9} (ibid: 64)
  \item \textsuperscript{10} (ibid: 56)
\end{itemize}
What are the implications of Foucault’s power structure interlaced with foreign policy under the Bush administration? Consider Foucault’s ideas about power in conjunction with body-object articulation:

The regulation imposed by power is at the same time the law of construction of the operation. Thus disciplinary power appears to have the function not so much of deduction as of synthesis, not so much of exploitation of the product as of coercive link with the apparatus of production. 12

This articulates with precision the position that George W. was in during 2001. Bush was regulated by the power of presidency, following the “normal” foreign policy of his predecessors, and thus he bolstered operation in the Middle East continuing American foreign policy. The disciplinary power exerted on Bush did not allow him to deduce options immediately at his disposal for Middle East combat operations but, rather, allowed a much easier path for him to follow that was the synthesis of past American foreign policy with his own, as well as the synthesis of American consumption patterns with US economic and security concerns. “And so he chose the path of least resistance.” 13

Finally, Bush was not entirely concerned with the exploitation of oil in the Middle East (though Cheney may have been) as he was with oil’s link with powering America’s livelihood and economy—thus oil is the “coercive link” with the “apparatus of production,” or the American economy.

Considering Foucault’s social theories, American society did not have the capacity to escape its power structure based on oil consumption. Bush could not escape the power structure that disciplined his actions to remain congruent with past policies, while also maintaining ‘business as usual’ for the American economy. The result was a president bound by his power structure, making tactical decisions based on American energy demand, and an American public remained bound by its oil power structure unable to alter societal norms. The normal was business as usual while the abnormal would have been directing massive investment into Renewable Energies; neither Bush nor American society are to blame. Rather the structures of power inherent in any state or society, as theorized by Foucault, do not easily allow for the abnormal.

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11 (ibid: 62)
12 (Foucault, 1975: 153)
13 (Klare, 2004: 61)