

# HPRS5042/6042 COMPLEX BODIES: QUESTIONING GENDER, RELIGION, & SEXUALITY

Dr Angus M Slater

# FOUCAULT: TRUTH / POWER / KNOWLEDGE

In this lecture, we will examine the first of the theorists of sex, sexuality, and gender that we will cover in the module as a whole – Michel Foucault.

You may have already come across Foucault in your earlier studies, as his work has had an influence on almost every discipline in the Humanities.

He is perhaps most well known for challenging ideas about the intersection of truth, power, and knowledge – the topic we will be focusing on today.



# MICHEL FOUCAULT

CAGE — MICHAEL JOHNSON, 2013

What do we know?

# MICHEL FOUCAULT (1926-1984)

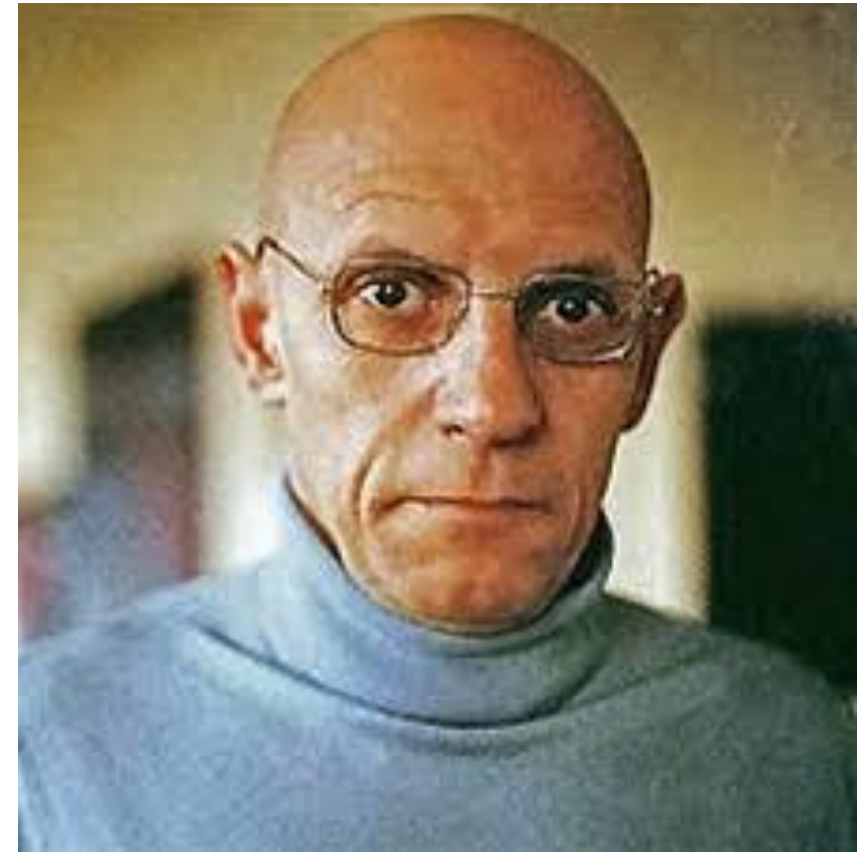
Michel Foucault is perhaps the founder of the modern humanities, possibly the most important thinker of the last 100 years.

Although a psychologist / philosopher by training, his work has had immeasurable impact on humanities and social studies, particularly through his theory of knowledge or epistemology.

He grows up in a relatively wealthy and privileged family, going to the ENS to study Psychology, gaining his doctorate in 1961.

Post-1968 activist-Head of Philosophy Department, riots and protests grip France in May 1968

Died of AIDS-related illness in 1984



# Steal his Look



**Yves Saint Laurent**  
\$ 4,000



**Our Legacy**  
\$ 140



**Warby Parker**  
\$ 145



**Bic**  
\$ 0.99

# MICHEL FOUCAULT

*“The work of Michel Foucault has transformed modern social theory. All the categories of Marxist, conflict, and mainstream thinking have been melted in air by the radical innovations of this French theorist”*

Social Theory: Power and identity in the global era - Roberta Garner, p. 405.

# MAJOR PUBLICATIONS

Madness and Civilization: A History of  
Insanity in the Age of Reason (1961)

The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology  
of Medical Perception (1963)

The Order of Things: An Archaeology of  
the Human Sciences (1966)

The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969)

Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of  
the Prison (1975)

The History of Sexuality (1975)  
(published 3 volumes of 6 planned)



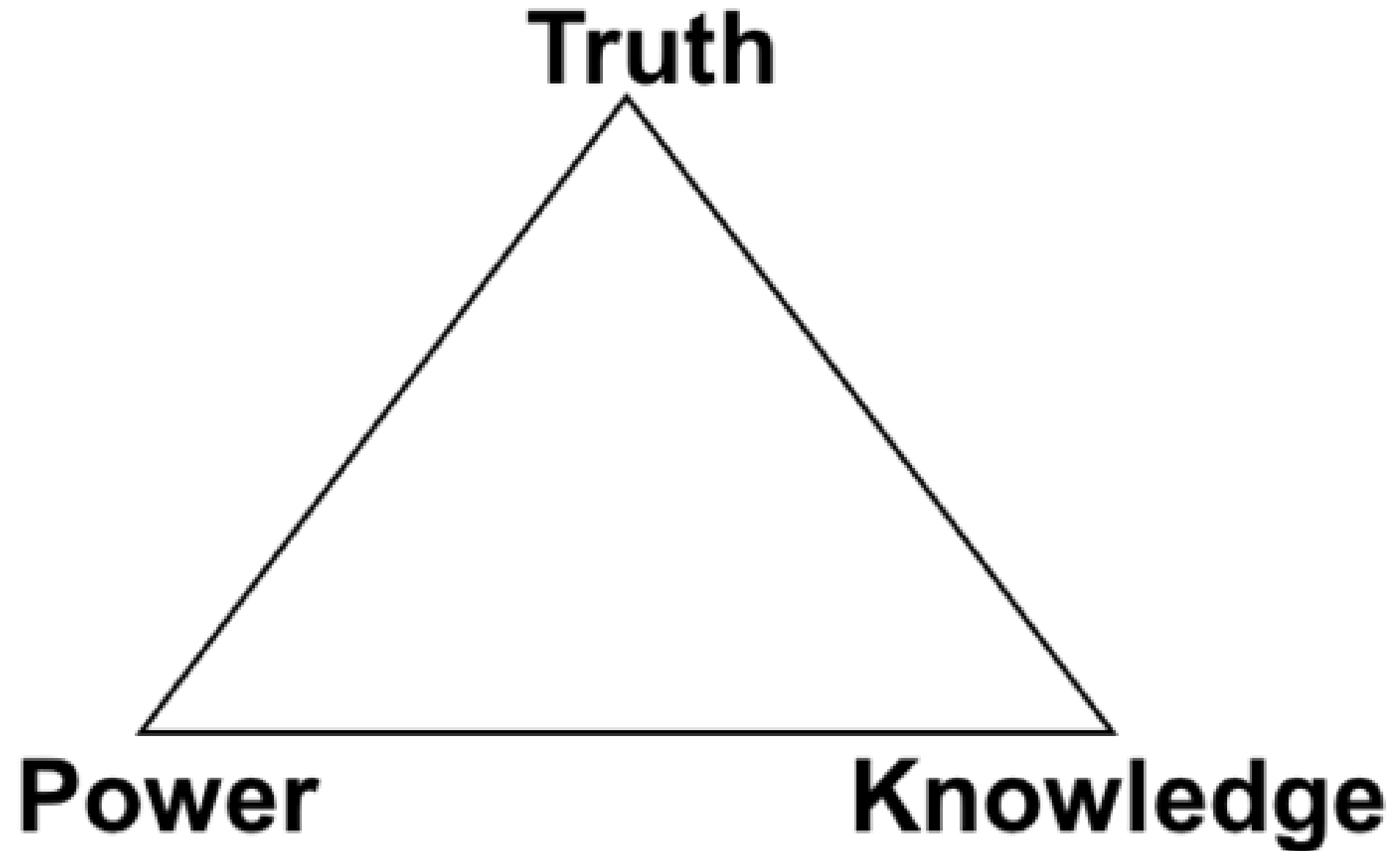
Literally anything

Foucault

Is this a prison?

**TRUTH  
KNOWLEDGE  
POWER**

A thin, vertical blue line is positioned to the right of the text, extending from the top of the word 'KNOWLEDGE' down to the bottom of the word 'POWER'.

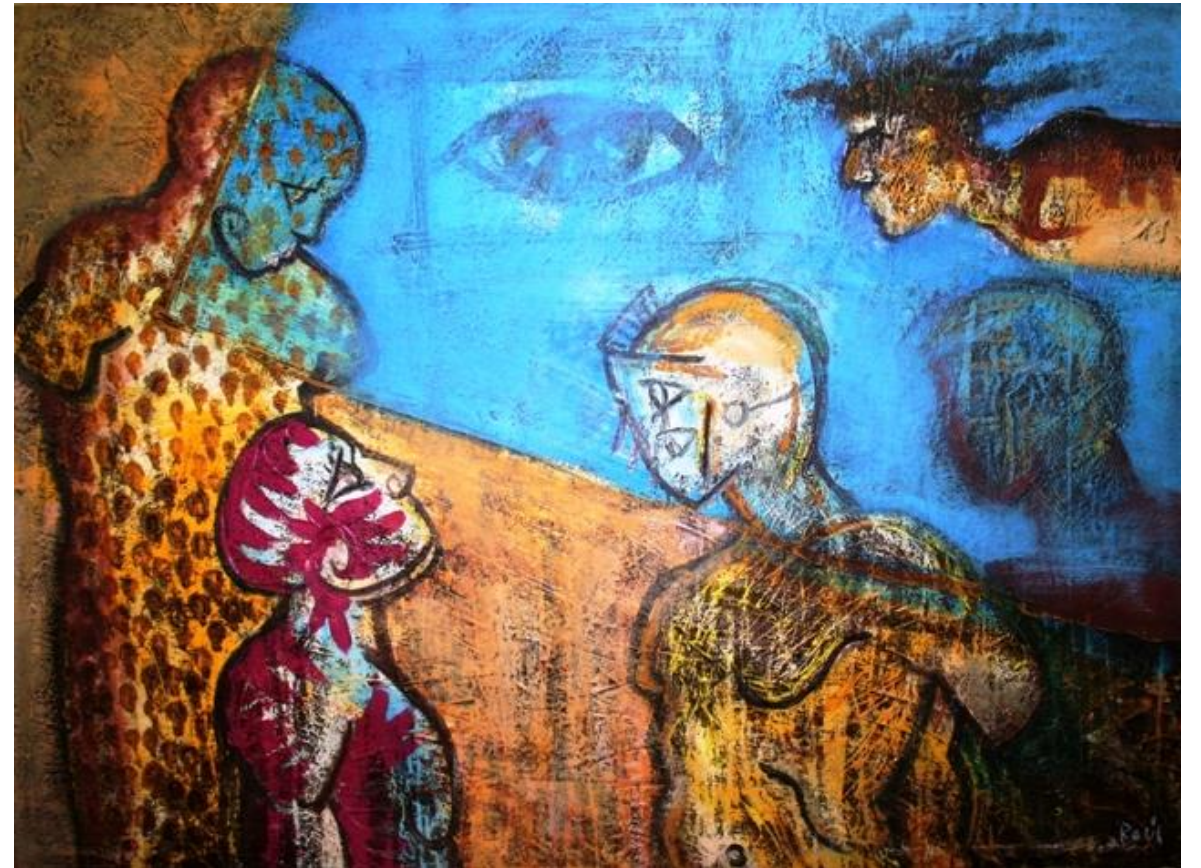


# THE NATURE OF TRUTH

Foucault's conception of 'truth' is not typical of traditional philosophy or most aspects of social science.

Traditional epistemology is concerned with the necessary and sufficient conditions for someone to know a state of affairs—e.g. "there is a red car across the street"

This involves sense experience (empiricism – Locke, Hume, Bacon), reason (rationalism – Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz), or defeat (scepticism – Hobbes, Kant, Bayle)

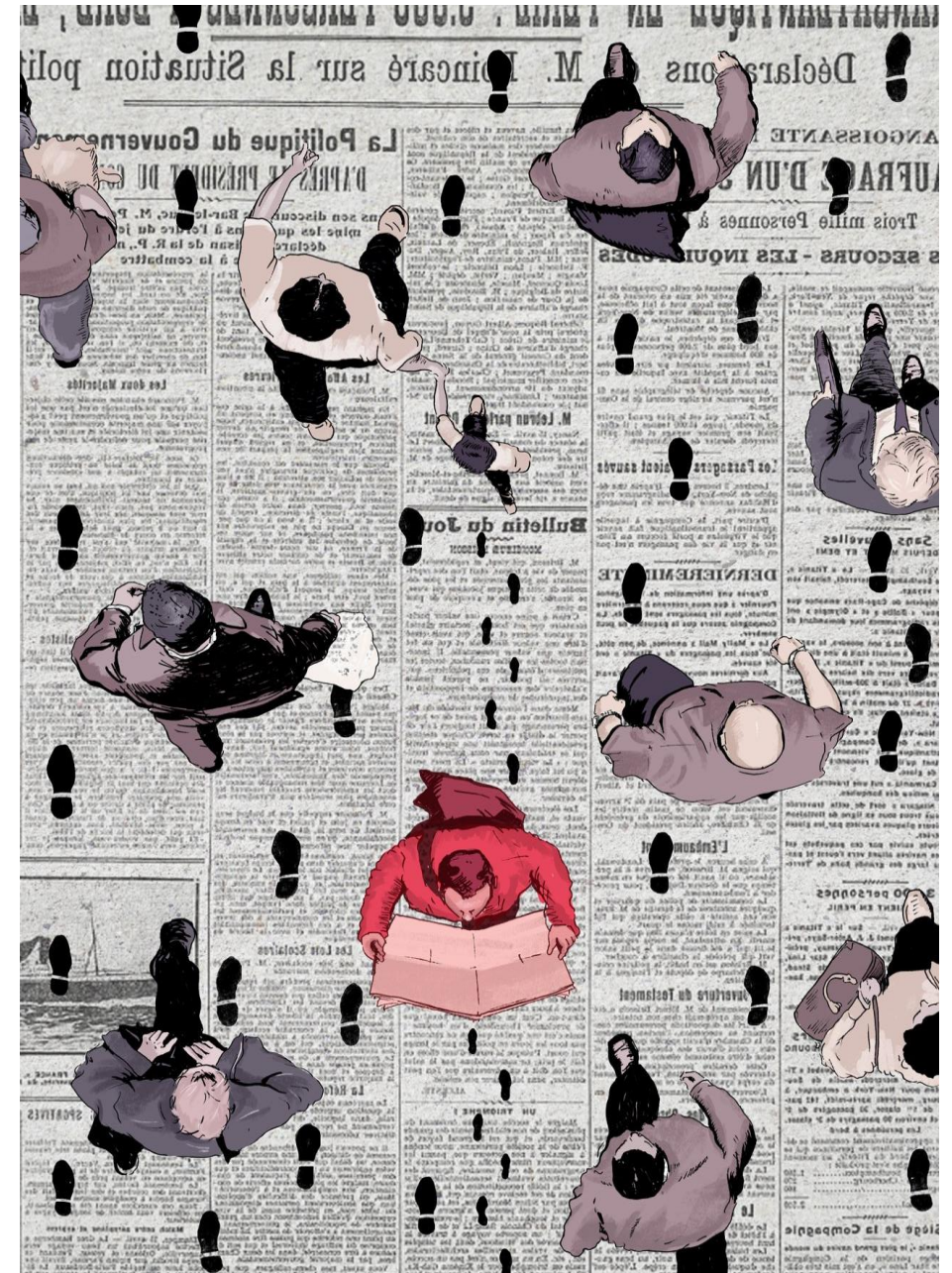


# THE NATURE OF TRUTH

The picture gets muddled when we consider much more complex examples, such as the claim that “humans between ages 2 and 4 are children”.

This means that truth involves judgement, categorisation, connection with other truths, maintenance, and normalisation.

The truth is not fixed, but produced in concert with other things.



# THE NATURE OF TRUTH

Truth is to be understood as:

*“a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements” (133).*

- 1 – What does this mean?
- 2 – What produces this system?
- 3 – What is the purpose of this system?

# THE NATURE OF TRUTH

*“‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (133).*

- 1 – What does this mean?
- 2 – What is meant by circular in this quotation?
- 3 – Is there truth beyond power?

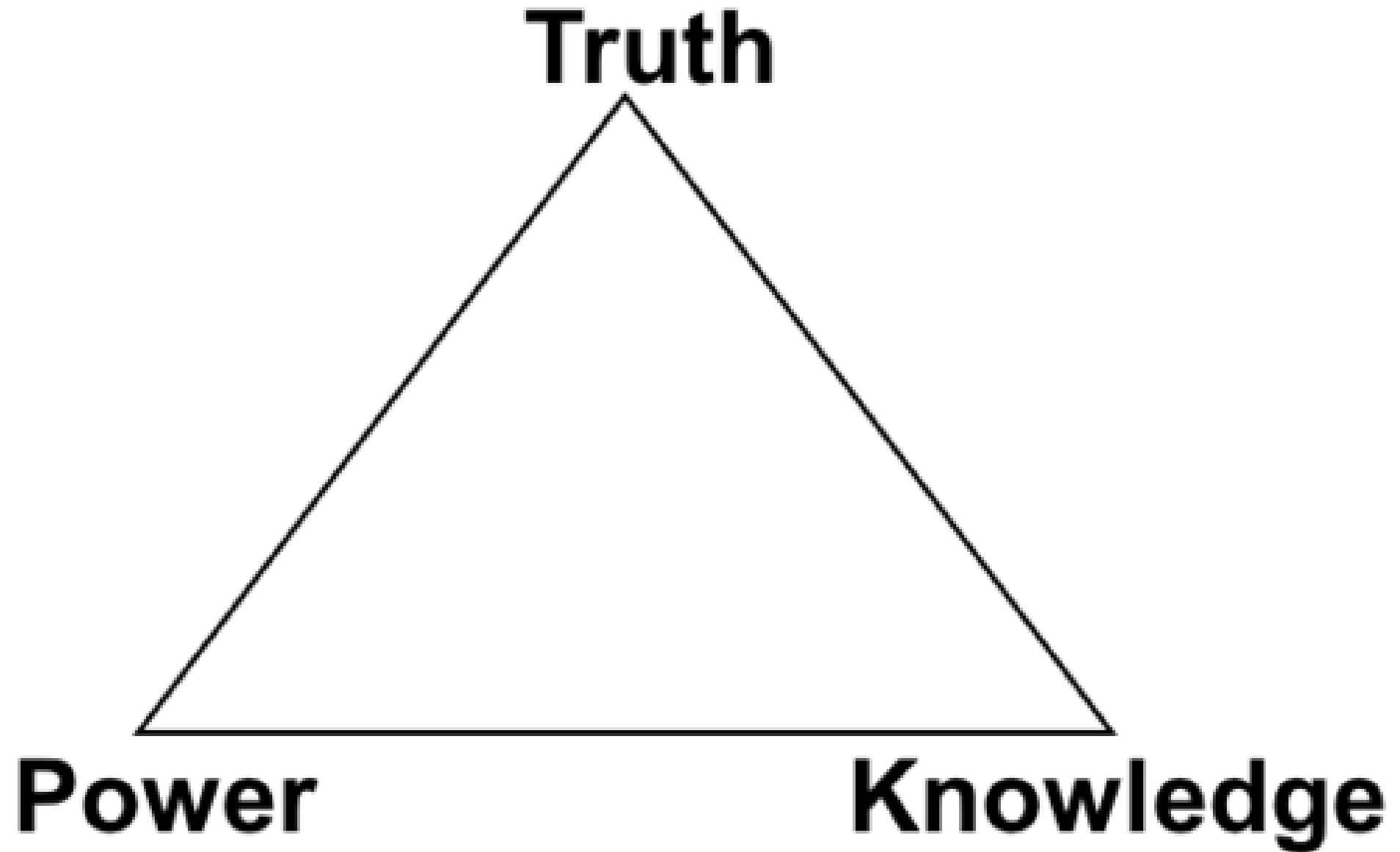
# THE NATURE OF TRUTH

Truth (in the social scientific or cultural sense) is dependant on the context, and on it's relationships to systems of power – which construct and maintain that truth.

We cannot have a set social truth – the entire notion of truth is dependant on the way society chooses to form truth.

We only know that children are incapable because we construct categories of capable and incapable behaviour. Without these categories of knowledge, the whole notion of a truth does not make sense.

**Truth is illusory.**

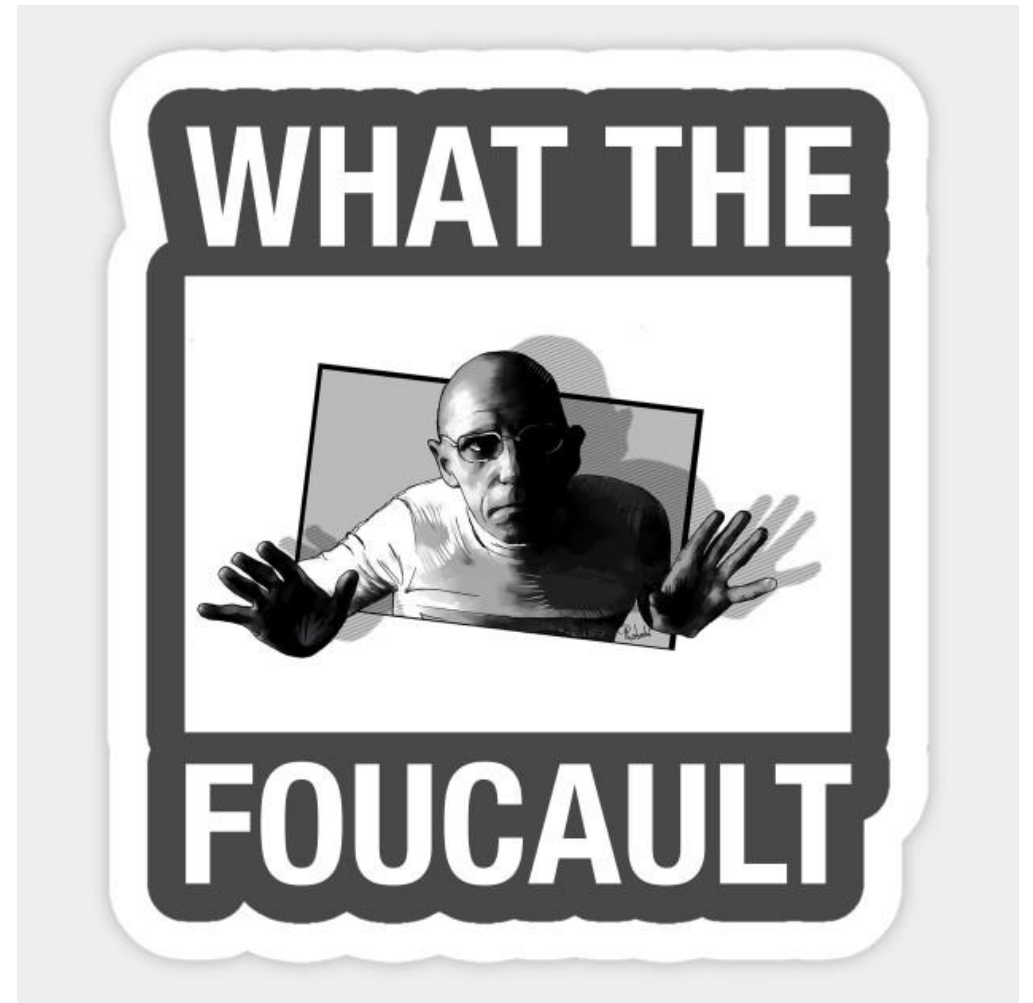


# THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE

As we have seen, our notion of Truth depends on our ability to form knowledge about things.

Without knowledge giving us data about the context of things, we cannot form notions of truth or correctness.

But how do we come to know anything?

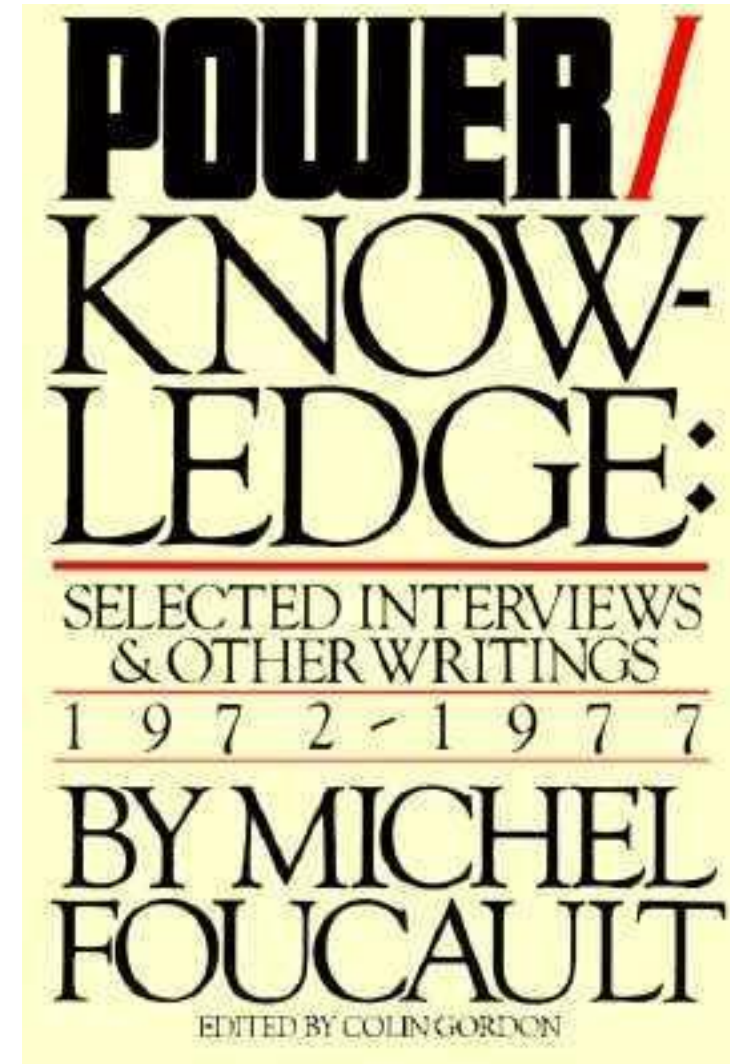


# THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE

For Foucault, our knowledge comes about through an exercise of power – in coming to know something, we exercise our intellect in order to place that thing within a system of understanding we already have.

We come to know by forcing new things into relationship with old things.

We “know” something when it fits well enough with our existing knowledge.



# THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE

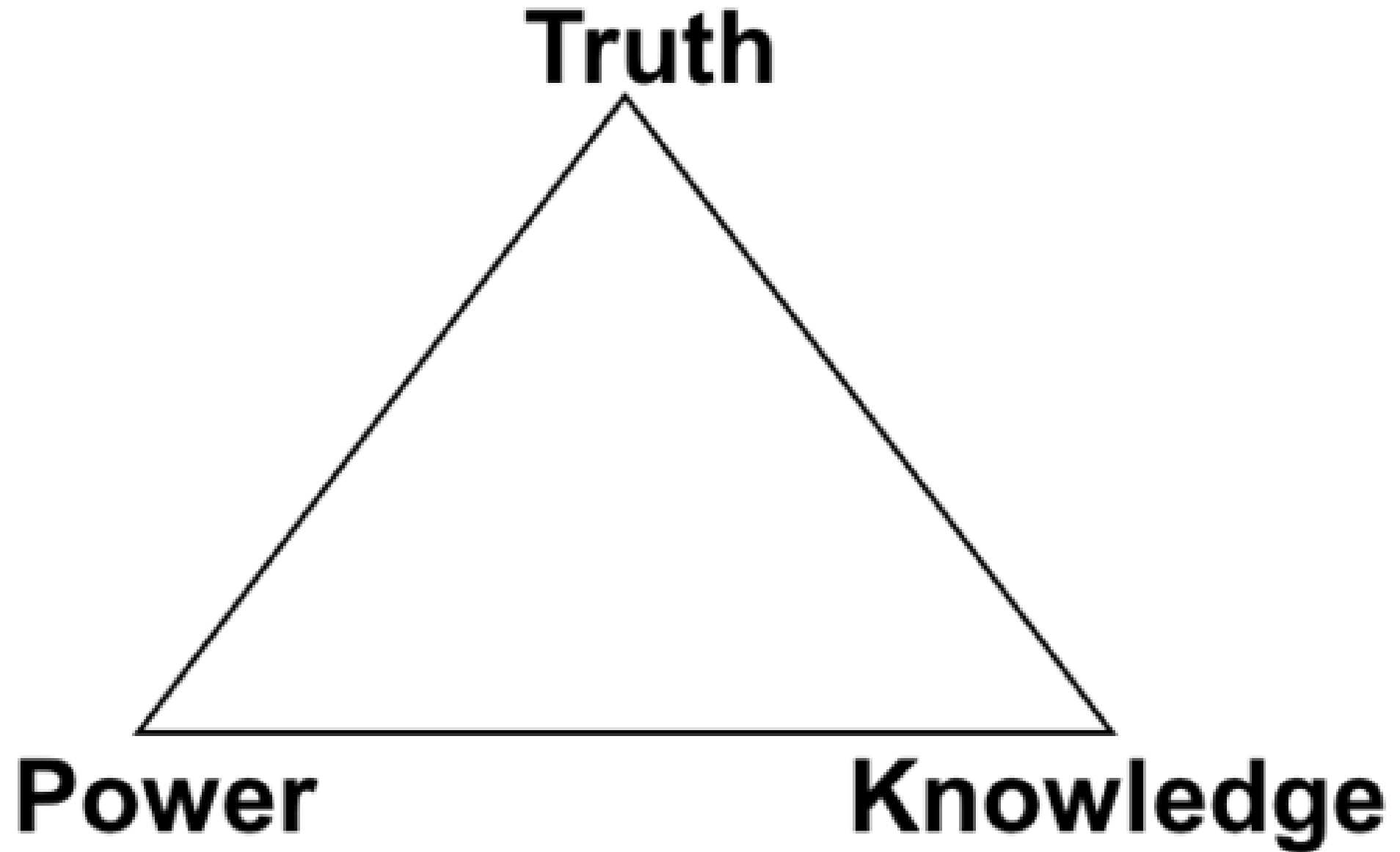
Due to this, the notion of “knowledge” is also disrupted – our knowledge is individual and based on our pre-existing forms of knowing.

Knowledge becomes something that differs across time and societies, with each forming new knowledge differently.

Knowledge is subjective and perspectival.

“Knowledge” is not necessarily the same as the “truth”





# THE NATURE OF POWER

So, for Foucault, the “truth” and “knowledge” are both formed through power:

“Truth” is produced through a categorisation of knowledge by power.

“Knowledge” is the exercise of power to make new things fit into our existing norms of truth.

Both Truth and Knowledge are produced by systems of Power.



# THE NATURE OF POWER

Power is therefore the ability to define or categorise things and to make those definitions or categorisations function as truth.

Foucault challenges the idea that power is wielded by people or groups by way of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive.

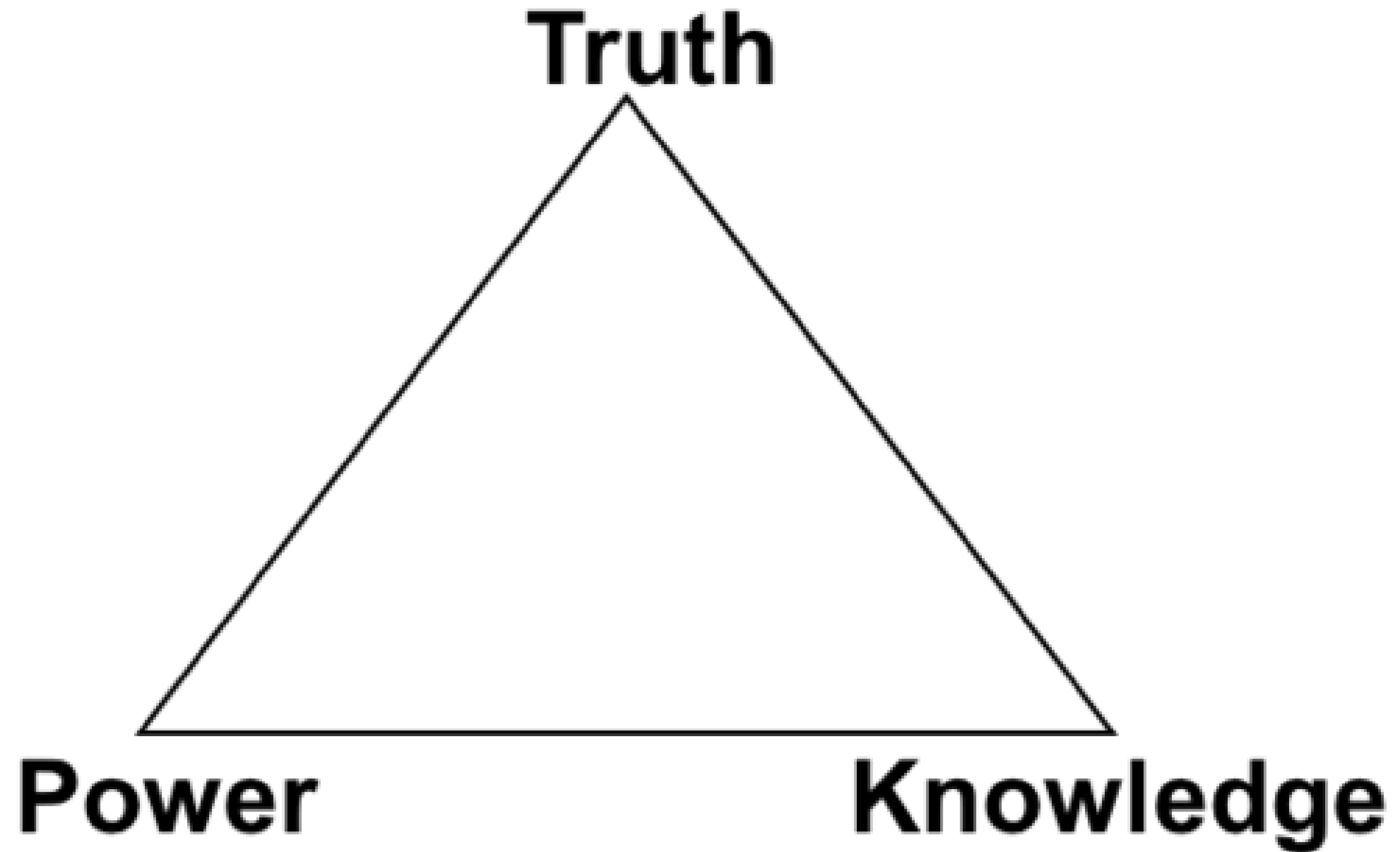


# THE NATURE OF POWER

‘Power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’ so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure (Foucault 1998: 63).

Instead it is a kind of ‘metapower’ or ‘regime of truth’ that pervades society, and which is in constant flux and negotiation.





# DISCUSSION

All participants to consider together:

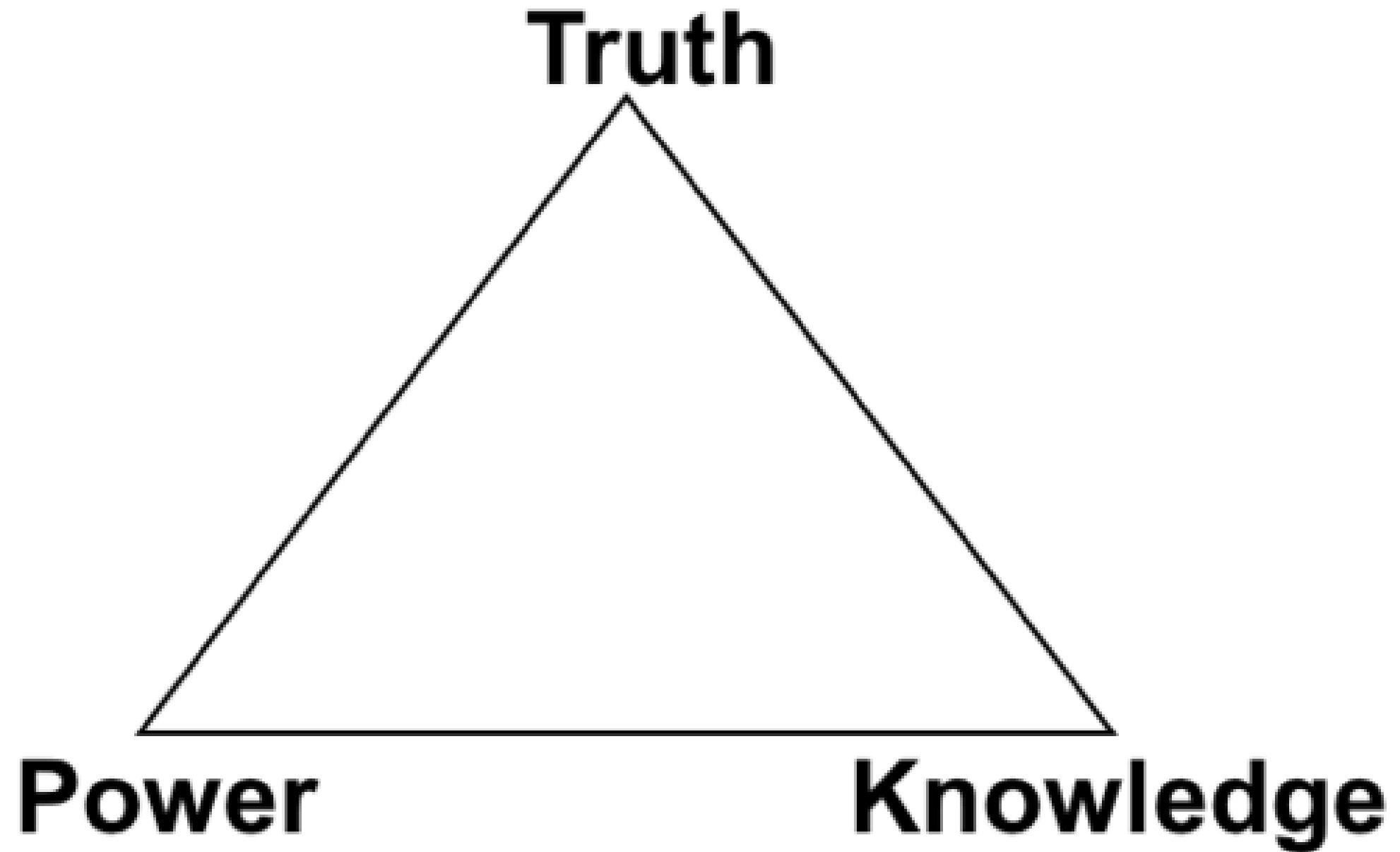
**1** – What constitutes power for Foucault?

**2** – What is the relationship of power to physical violence for Foucault?

**3** – What forms of truth may this understanding operate differently for?

**4** – What might that distinction be doing, for Foucault?





# THE RELATION BETWEEN TRUTH AND POWER

Foucault examines the relation between truth and power.

For him, “truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power. ... [Truth] isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude ... Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple form of constraint” (131).

What, then, does Foucault mean by ‘truth’?

# THE RELATION BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

Foucault also paid a great deal of attention to the connection between power and knowledge

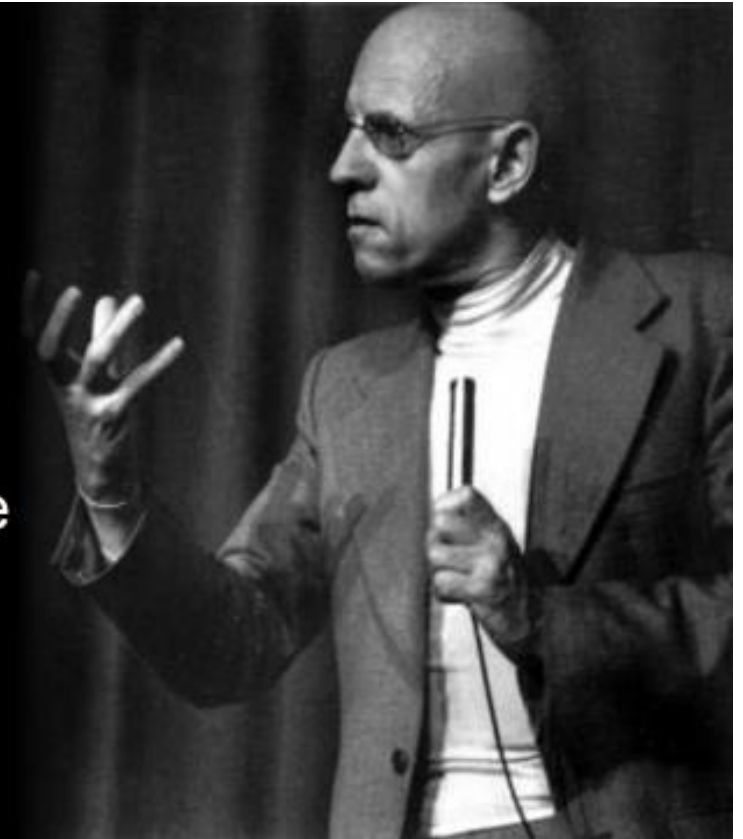
How power shapes knowledge

How power is justified through systems of knowledge

How power maintains itself through knowledge

There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.

Michel Foucault



# WHAT DO WE DO?

Basic idea:

Truth is produced by power through the categorisation of knowledge.

The truth of whether someone is insane or not is formed by our broad knowledge of human behaviour being constructed and influenced by the power to define, and enforce, some behaviour as sane and some as not.

Power manifests in the definition (diffuse) and the enforcement of that definition (concentrated).

**Where is power located in society?**

**How does power operate in our current society?**

**How can we fight or resist power?**

**Can we ever have truth outside of power?**

**Is power a bad thing?**

# MICHEL FOUCAULT, “TRUTH AND POWER,” 131

*“It’s not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power), but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural within which it operates at the present time”*

# MICHEL FOUCAULT, “TRUTH AND POWER,” 194

*‘We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production’*

# READING

Today, we have begun to dig into the nature of truth, knowledge, and power in the work of Michel Foucault

Your reading for this session is 'Discipline and Instruction' and 'Relations of Power' in "Understanding Foucault".

A permalink to this book is included on the Moodle page.

