

Michel Foucault – Discipline and Punish

Context

Background information

Paul-Michel Foucault was born on October 15, 1926 in Poitiers, France. His father was a doctor, and he had a standard provincial upbringing. He was educated at the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Paris from 1946 to 1950, where he studied philosophy and psychology and was briefly a member of the French communist party. Foucault observed clinics at the Sainte Anne mental asylum whilst he was at the ENS. After graduating, Foucault taught psychology at Lille University. In 1955 he went to Sweden as the head of the French cultural delegation to Uppsala. He wrote much of his first major work, *Madness and Civilization* at the University of Uppsala. Foucault was transferred to Poland, then to Hamburg.

Madness and Civilization was presented as his doctoral thesis in 1960, and was published in 1961. Foucault became a professor of philosophy and psychology at the University of Clermont-Ferrand from 1960. This really represented the beginning of his career as a public intellectual. He joined the editorial board of the French critical journal, *Tel Quel*. Other works followed: a study of the poet Raymond Roussel (1963), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *The Order of Things* (1966), *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and the three volumes of his *History of Sexuality*. Foucault taught in Tunisia and at the University of Vincennes before his appointment to a Professorship in the History of Systems of Thought at the highly prestigious College de France in 1970.

Foucault was not only an intellectual and philosopher, but also a political activist. He was involved in a wide range of protests and campaigns: against the war in Algeria, against racism, against the Vietnam War, and for prison reform. For much of the 1970s his political work occupied him almost entirely. Foucault was openly gay since his student days, and lived with his long-term partner Daniel Defert. He died of an AIDS-related illness in 1984.

Historical and Philosophical contexts

Foucault's intellectual family tree is notoriously hard to trace. Throughout his career, he was hostile to attempts to link him to a particular movement. At some points, he linked himself to the critical philosophy of Kant, or to the history of science practiced by his mentor George Canguilhem. Describing the influences on his work is therefore a complicated business. Three influences are particularly important in *Discipline and Punish*: Nietzsche, structuralism and Foucault's political activism. None entirely explain his project, however.

The influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on Foucault was considerable, particularly in his student days. Foucault credited Nietzsche with freeing him from the "prison" of Hegelian philosophy and the existentialism and Marxism of Sartre, which represented the dominant French intellectual trend of the 1940s and 50s. Nietzsche also influenced Foucault's conception of madness in *Madness and Civilization*. In simplified form, Nietzsche's philosophy emphasized the coming crisis of religion and morality, and his deep-felt hostility to religion. He was perhaps the first philosopher to argue that "God is dead", and to suggest how man could progress beyond this situation. These methods included a reinterpretation of man and the natural world along more positive lines, and the tracing of a genealogy of morals. The concept of genealogy is perhaps Nietzsche's main legacy to Foucault. Nietzsche's idea of a "genealogy of morals" sought to reinterpret morality "from the perspective of life," praising those qualities that enhanced life, rather than the "herd morality" that detracted from it. In Foucault's work, genealogy became an attempt to examine various discourses from a critical viewpoint: his essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* presents Foucault's interpretation of Nietzsche's idea of history.

Foucault's relationship to the loosely-defined movement known as structuralism is complex. He repeatedly denied being a "structuralist," but many critics have nevertheless linked his work to that of structuralist thinkers such as Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Lacan. Structuralism as a movement attempted to study particular philosophical structures and systems of language. It derives from the work of the linguistic theorist de Saussure, who emphasized the role of "signs" in language. Signs are composed of the sounds that "signify" a word, and the object or concept that they signify. Speech and language are a complex interplay of different signs. De Saussure also argued for two different approaches to the history of language: the synchronic and the diachronic. A synchronic study treats structures at a particular moment in time, whereas the diachronic approach is historical.

Many of Foucault's concerns might be described as being "structuralist", such as his interest in the role of language and systems of power in controlling individuals. More importantly, his conception of the individual resembles that of many other structuralists. Although much of Foucault's work is aimed at giving individuals trapped within a particular discourse a "voice", universal ideas of human nature or man are meaningless. For him, the wider structures that control and create man are more important. *Discipline and Punish* does not claim to be a "structuralist" interpretation of the prison, but reading it in this way may be useful. You should beware of putting Foucault into narrow philosophical categories, however: his attempts to resist definition are important in any interpretation of his work.

A more immediate influence is Foucault's involvement in the French campaign for prison reform, GIP (Groupe d'information sur les prisons). As a political activist, Foucault visited prisons in France and America, wrote pamphlets and spoke in public about prison conditions. This experience was obviously not the only factor that drove him to write *Discipline and Punish*, but it shows that his notion of prison life was more than purely theoretical. The book is in many ways an attempt to give a theoretical grounding to what Foucault had seen, to explain the conditions and structures of the places he visited in terms of the operation of power in society.

Foucault's influence is considerable. This influence is particularly marked in America, and is most evident in the adoption of his terminology by other philosophers and historians. The notion of the discourse, and of the relationship between power and knowledge are particularly influential. Philosophers have attempted to apply some of Foucault's methods to other areas, such as the history of ideas, feminism and "postmodernism" (a term Foucault never used). Arguably, many writers do this without considering the implications: Foucault's role as the fashionable theorist of 1980s and 90s has resulted in many bad books allegedly influenced by him.

Criticism of Foucault's methods and conclusions is also widespread. Traditionally, he is accused by historians of mishandling evidence and of ignoring previous work in various fields. Foucault's legendary carelessness with footnotes and references may have something to do with this. *Discipline and Punish* tends to escape relatively lightly, but formidable opposition is lined up against Foucault: his obscurity, hostility to traditional institutions and sloppy scholarship do not endear him to some people. Indeed, one critic said, "Foucault-bashing is the favorite indoor sport of American academics."

General Summary

Discipline and Punish is a history of the modern penal system. Foucault seeks to analyze punishment in its social context, and to examine how changing [power](#) relations affected punishment. He begins by analyzing the situation before the eighteenth century, when public execution and corporal punishment were key punishments, and torture was part of most criminal investigations. Punishment was ceremonial and directed at the prisoner's body. It was a ritual in which the audience was important. Public execution reestablished the authority and power of the King. Popular literature reported the details of executions, and the public was heavily involved in them.

The eighteenth century saw various calls for reform of punishment. The reformers, according to Foucault, were not motivated by a concern for the welfare of prisoners. Rather, they wanted to make power operate more efficiently. They proposed a theater of punishment, in which a complex system of representations and signs was displayed publicly. Punishments related obviously to their crimes, and served as an obstacle to lawbreaking.

Prison is not yet imaginable as a penalty. Three new models of [penalty](#) helped to overcome resistance to it. Nevertheless, great differences existed between this kind of coercive institution and the early, punitive city. The way is prepared for the prison by the developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the disciplines. [Discipline](#) is a series of techniques by which the body's operations can be controlled. Discipline worked by coercing and arranging the individual's movements and his experience of space and time. This is achieved by devices such as timetables and military drills, and the process of [exercise](#). Through discipline, individuals are created out of a mass. Disciplinary power has three elements: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination. Observation and the gaze are key instruments of power. By these processes, and through [the human sciences](#), the notion of the [norm](#) developed.

Disciplinary power is exemplified by Bentham's Panopticon, a building that shows how individuals can be supervised and controlled efficiently. Institutions modeled on the panopticon begin to spread throughout society. Prison develops from this idea of discipline. It aims both to deprive the individual of his freedom and to reform him. The [penitentiary](#) is the next development. It combines the prison with the workshop and the hospital. The penitentiary replaces the prisoner with the [delinquent](#). The delinquent is created as a response to changes in popular illegality, in order to marginalize and control popular behavior.

Criticism of the failure of prisons misses the point, because failure is part of its very nature. The process by which failure and operation are combined is [the carceral system](#). The aim of prison, and of the carceral system, is to produce delinquency as a means of structuring and controlling crime. From this perspective, they succeed. The prison is part of a network of power that spreads throughout society, and which is controlled by the rules of strategy alone. Calls for its abolition fail to recognize the depth at which it is embedded in modern society, or its real function.

Important Terms

The carceral system - The complex system introduced towards the end of Discipline and Punish. It attempts to explain both the operation of the modern prison and its failure. [The carceral system](#) includes the architecture of the prison, its regulations and its staff: it extends beyond the prison itself to penetrate into society. Its components are the [discipline](#) of the prison, the development of a rational technique for managing prisoners, the rise of criminality and strategies of reform. The carceral system therefore contains both the failure and reform of the prison; it is part of Foucault's argument that failure is an essential part of the working of the prison. See also [delinquent](#).

The classical period - The time-period from 1660 to the end of the 19th century. Discipline and Punish, like most of Foucault's works, refers mainly to this age. For Foucault, [the classical period](#) is seen as the birth of many of the characteristic institutions and structures of the modern world, as well as of mechanisms of control and [the human sciences](#).

Delinquent - The concept that eventually replaces that of the "prisoner", according to Foucault. The delinquent is created by the operation of the carceral system and the human sciences, and strictly separated from other popular illegal activities. He is part of a small, hardened group of criminals, identified with the lower social classes. Most importantly, he is defined as "abnormal", and analyzed and controlled by the mechanisms that Foucault describes. There are several advantages in replacing the criminal by the delinquent: delinquents are clearly set apart from the rest of society, and therefore easy to supervise and control. A small, controlled group is far easier to cope with than the alternative: large roaming bands of brigands and robbers, or revolutionary crowds. In part, Foucault argues that the figure of the delinquent was a response to the danger presented by the lower orders in the nineteenth century.

Discipline - Discipline is a way of controlling the movement and operations of the body in a constant way. It is a type of [power](#) that coerces the body by regulating and dividing up its movement, and the space and time in which it moves. Timetables and the ranks into which soldiers are arranged are examples of this regulation. The disciplines are the methods by which this control became possible. Foucault traces the origins of discipline back to monasteries and armies. He is clear, however, that the concept changed in the eighteenth century. Discipline became a widely used technique to control whole populations. The modern prison, and indeed the modern state, is unthinkable without this idea of the mass control of bodies and movement.

Discourse - The basic unit that Foucault analyzes in all his works. Foucault defines the [discourse](#) as a system in which certain knowledge is possible; discourses determine what is true or false in a particular field. The discourse of psychiatry, for example, determines what it is possible to know about madness. Saying things outside of a discourse is almost impossible. Foucault's argument about prisons is a good example: abolishing the prison is unthinkable partly because we do not have the words to describe any alternative. The prison is at the center of the modern discourse of punishment.

Exercise - Foucault traces [exercise](#) back to monasteries and the activities of monks. In its early form, it involves regulating the body by imposing religious activities upon it in order to please God and achieve salvation. Foucault argues that the concept changed in the classical period. It became an attempt to impose increasingly complex activities on the body in order to control it. Military drills, or physical training at school are examples of this later form of exercise.

Genealogy - A concept that Foucault originally borrowed from Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals, but made his own. A [genealogy](#) is an attempt to consider the origins of systems of knowledge, and to analyze discourses. It attempts to reveal the discontinuities and breaks in a discourse, to focus on the specific rather than on the general. In doing so, it aims to show that there have been other ways of thinking and acting, and that modern discourses are not any truer than those in the past. Most importantly, it aims to show that many modern ideas are not self-evidently "true", but the product of the workings of power. Foucault's genealogies aim to allow individuals trapped or excluded by such systems of knowledge to speak out; one of the aims of Discipline and Punish is to give modern prisoners, who are categorized as abnormal, examined and analyzed by criminologists and prison warders, a voice. The genealogy is somewhat similar to Foucault's idea of "Archaeology", found in The Order of Things, which emphasizes discontinuity to a greater extent.

The human sciences - Sciences, or bodies of knowledge that have man as their subject. Psychiatry, criminology, sociology, psychology and medicine are the main human sciences. Together, the human sciences create a regime of power that controls and describes human behavior in terms of norms. By setting

out what is "normal", the human sciences also create the idea of abnormality or deviation. Much of Foucault's work is an attempt to analyze how these categories structure modern life. See "norm" [below].

Norm - An average standard created by the human sciences against which people are measured: the sane man, the law-abiding citizen, and the obedient child are all "normal" people. But an idea of the "normal" also implies the existence of the abnormal: the madman, the criminal and the deviant are the reverse side of this coin. An idea of deviance is possible only where norms exist. For Foucault, norms are concepts that are constantly used to evaluate and control us: they also exclude those who cannot conform to "normal" categories. As such, they are an unavoidable but somehow harmful feature of modern society. See human sciences.

Penalty - The particular system of investigation and punishment that a society uses. [Penalty](#) includes all aspects of the examination and treatment of those who break the law. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault charts the development of the modern system of penalty, which is based around the prison and the observation and control of convicts.

Penitentiary - The [penitentiary](#) is a prison that does more than merely deprive men of their freedom. It also makes them work, and observes and treats them in a prison hospital. This combination of workshop, hospital and prison is the defining feature of the modern prison system for Foucault. The penitentiary also has a major role in creating the delinquent.

Power - Foucault's conception of power is a central part of this work. Essentially, power is a relationship between people in which one affects another's actions. Power differs from force or violence, which affect the body physically. It involves making a free subject do something that he would not have done otherwise: power therefore involves restricting or altering someone's will. Power is present in all human relationships, and penetrates throughout society. The state does not have a monopoly over power, because power relations are deeply unstable and changeable. Having said that, patterns of domination do exist in society: for example, the modern power to punish was established through the action of the human sciences. The relationship between power and knowledge is also an important one. The human sciences are able to control and exclude people because they make claims to both knowledge and power. To claim that a statement is true is also to make a claim to power because truth can only be produced by power. Criminology can make claims that exclude the delinquent, for example, because a system of power relations exists in which the delinquent is dominated.

Important Quotations Explained

This book is intended as a correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge.

This quotation represents Foucault's project in a nutshell. *Discipline and Punish* aims to chart the transformation from a situation where atrocious sentences were passed by a judge, and carried out in public, to one where the experts of the human sciences judge everyone in society according to the norm established by their discipline. A new power to judge develops when psychiatrists, prison warders and other "technicians of discipline" begin to judge and analyze the criminal after the sentence has been passed. This new power is part of the development of a wider modern system of power and knowledge analyzed by Foucault.

The idea of a history of the soul is also an important one. One of the many models that Foucault uses is the shift of penalty from a focus on the body to a focus on the soul. The modern system of discipline works on and attempts to reform the soul. Therefore an analysis of the development of modern discipline is also a history of the soul it created and attempts to control.

We have then a public execution and a timetable. They do not punish the same type of crimes or the same type of delinquent. But they each define a certain penal style.

Taken from the very beginning of the work, this quotation shows both Foucault's love of contrast, and the fundamental change that *Discipline and Punish* addresses. The two penal styles to which he refers are the pre-modern system, in which punishment is carried out on the body of the criminal in a public and violent manner, and the carceral system, in which the criminal's soul is the object of attention. The execution cuts and burns the criminal's body: the timetable regulates his soul, dividing his time into smaller, ordered parts. The execution represents a penalty in which the public restoration of order is vital; the timetable represents one in which the aim is to classify and order behavior in an attempt to control the individual.

The Panopticon is a marvelous machine which, whatever use one may wish to put it to, produces homogeneous effects of power.

The Panopticon, the fantastic building designed by Bentham, has become a symbol of Foucault's argument. From the center of the panopticon, the controller can see each individual room or cell. Its effects are homogenous because, whether the building is used as a school or a prison, power operates in a certain way within it. Each individual held within it is isolated, permanently exposed to the gaze of the observer; by

looking at them, the observer controls them. It is a building that makes examination easy: it is marvelous both because it allows one person to have power over many, and because it is such an unusual construction.

Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?

One of the central points of Foucault's discussion of the carceral system is that the form of discipline associated with the modern prison is not contained within prison walls, but derives from the society beyond those walls. The mechanisms of control, examination and classification operate within all the institutions that Foucault discusses. Indeed, power in its various forms flows through all of them. Prisons resemble these other institutions not just because they have similar architecture, but because they all fulfill similar functions.

We are now far away from the country of tortures, dotted with wheels, gibbets, gallows, pillories; we are far, too, from that dream of the reformers, less than fifty years before.

This quotation reinforces the contrast drawn at the start of the book. The "country of tortures" is one in which punishment is publicly visible and horrific; indeed, part of its effectiveness lies in the fact that the devices of torture and execution are well-known to the public. The eighteenth century reformers' dream, never completely enacted in practice, is a dream of a theater of punishment in which the public watches and is influenced by a system of signs and representations that link different crimes to their punishments. Foucault's point is that the modern system of penalty differs greatly from both models, but that there was no reason why it should have done. In considering both the lost country and the reformers' dream, Foucault explains why one model defeated the other two.

Philosophical Themes, Ideas and Arguments

Power and Knowledge

The relationship between power and knowledge is central to Foucault's work. *Discipline and Punish* essentially charts the reorganization of the power to punish, and the development of various bodies of knowledge (the human sciences) that reinforce and interact with that power. The modern power to punish is based on the supervision and organization of bodies in time and space, according to strict technical methods: the modern knowledge that Foucault describes is the knowledge that relates to human nature and behavior, which is measured against a norm. Foucault's point is that one cannot exist without the other. The power and techniques of punishment depend on knowledge that creates and classifies individuals, and that knowledge derives its authority from certain relationships of power and domination.

The Body

The body as an object to be acted upon, but also as the subject of "political technology" is present throughout the work. Beginning with public execution, where the body is horrifically displayed, Foucault charts the transition to a situation where the body is no longer immediately affected. The body will always be affected by punishment—because we cannot imagine a non-corporal punishment—but in the modern system, Foucault says, the body is arranged, regulated and supervised rather than tortured. At the same time, the overall aim of the penal process becomes the reform of the soul, rather than the punishment of the body. Eventually, the concepts of the individual and the delinquent replace the reality of the body as the focus of attention, but the body of the criminal still plays a role. If anything can be seen as constant in this work, it is the idea that the body and punishment are closely linked.

The History of the Soul

Foucault's project in *Discipline and Punish* is to account for the modern penal system, but he also presents a genealogical account of the modern soul. This is not only due to the fact that the soul gradually replaces the body as the focus of punishment and reform. It is also due to the fact that modern processes of discipline have essentially created that soul. Without the human sciences and the various mechanisms of observation and examination, the normal soul or mind would not exist. Ideas such as the psyche, conscience, and good behavior are effects created by a particular regime of power and knowledge. For Foucault, examining that regime is a way of looking deep into our souls. His history of the soul is also a powerful critique, because it makes us confront what we have become by excluding and marginalizing certain elements of our society.

The Prison and Society

The relationship between the prison and the wider society cannot be stressed enough. For Foucault, the prison is not a marginal building on the edge of a city, but is closely integrated into the city. The same

"strategies" of power and knowledge operate in both locations, and the mechanisms of discipline that control the delinquent also control the citizen. Indeed, the methods of observation and control that Foucault describes originated in monasteries, in hospitals and in the army. Related to this point is Foucault's argument that we cannot abolish the prison, because our ways of thinking about and carrying out punishment will not allow it. The prison is part of a "carceral network" that spreads throughout society, infiltrating and penetrating everywhere.

Paradox and Contrast

This is perhaps more a stylistic point than a theme, but *Discipline and Punish* reveals Foucault's addiction to contrast and contradiction. From the shocking image at the beginning of the work to the many numbered lists and pairs of terms, the work is structured around a series of conceits and paradoxes. The idea that prison contains its own failure is a good example. Critics have criticized Foucault for what they see as his chronic obscurity, but at least part of the problem comes from his attitude to language and discourse. Discourses are complex structures in which people can become "trapped": perhaps the experience of being trapped inside some of Foucault's more difficult sentences is meant to echo this. Or perhaps, like many French philosophers, he was just fond of linguistic jokes.

The Carceral

Summary

Foucault dates the completion of the carceral system to February 22, 1840: the date of the opening of Mettray prison colony. This colony is the disciplinary form at its most extreme. The chiefs and deputies at Mettray were technicians of behavior. Their task was to produce bodies that were docile and capable. Historians of the human sciences also date the birth of scientific psychology to this time. Mettray represented the birth of a new kind of supervision.

Why choose this moment as the beginning of the modern art of punishment? Mettray was the most famous of a series of carceral institutions. If the great classical form of confinement was dismantled, it still existed albeit in a different way. A carceral continuum was constructed that included confinement, judicial punishment and institutions of discipline. The breadth and precocity of this phenomenon was striking. Prison turned the punitive procedure into a penitentiary technique, with several important results: One) a slow continuous gradation was established that made it possible to move from order to offense and back to the "norm". Two) the carceral network allows the recruitment of major delinquents—the nineteenth century created channels within the system that created docility and delinquency together. Three) most importantly, the carceral succeeds in making the power to punish legitimate and accepted. The theory of the contract only partly explains the rise of a new power to punish; another answer comes from the idea of a carceral continuum that was the technical counterpart to granting a right to punish. Four) the carceral allowed the emergence of a new form of law: the norm. Now, the judges of normality were everywhere; a reign of the normative exists, to which everyone subjects his body. Five) the carceral texture of society allows the body to be captured and observed. Six) because the prison was rooted in the mechanisms and strategies of power, it could resist attempts to abolish it. This does not mean that it cannot be altered: processes that affect its utility, and the growth of other supervisory networks, such as medicine, psychiatry and social work, will alter the prison. The overall political issue of prisons is whether we should have them, or something else. Now the problem lies in the increasing use of mechanisms of normalization and the powers attached to them. The carceral city is very different to the theater of punishment. Laws and courts do not control the prison, but vice versa. The prison is linked to a carceral network that normalizes. Ultimately only the rules of strategy control these mechanisms. Foucault sees this book as a historical background to various studies of power, normalization and the formation of knowledge in society.

Analysis

This section draws together the threads of Foucault's argument, with few new ideas. The prison, the penitentiary and the carceral system are all put in their place. The carceral system in particular is extended beyond the walls of the prison; we can, Foucault suggests, talk about the modern system of punishment as a "carceral city" because the prison is so closely linked to the rest of society by a network of power that shapes everyone's life.

A new way of seeing the carceral system is also suggested. The idea of a continuum, in which different levels of severity are arranged on a scale, resembles the kind of classification or ranking that is established in the process of observation. An acceptance of the carceral system points to the triumph of the law of the norm, and to the end of Foucault's account of the transformation of judgment. A society like ours where the carceral system operates is one in which the human sciences judge all and exclude some on the basis of norms. This is an unchangeable fact, but it should not prevent resistance against the rule of the norm.

The carceral system is powerful and in many ways harmful, but Foucault holds out some hope of change. However, the chief agent of change is likely to be the growth of the human sciences themselves, which may one day take over some of the supervisory and observational work of the prison. Whether this will represent a degree of progress is left uncertain. Foucault's last words suggest the real purpose of this account is not to inspire rebellion against the modern disciplinary system, but to promote understanding of its components and operation.