

THE BODY AS A SURFACE OF ACTION FOR POWER DISPOSITIFS IN FOUCAULT'S GENEALOGY

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Abstract: *After a general introduction into Michel Foucault's work where we aim to underline the structural connections between three of his most important themes, namely knowledge, power and morals, we shall proceed in showing how the human body becomes both a subject of interest for power dispositifs and a subject of knowledge for (human) sciences. This interest for the body is generated by political and economic interests and leads towards a certain biopolitics. In order to show how political and economic interest for the body translates into action, we have analyzed the evolution of punishments and birth of prison.*

Keywords: *biopolitics, prison, body, history, punishments, power, genealogy.*

Michel Foucault developed his writings in three periods, namely: the archeological period, focused on epistemological matters; the genealogical period, focused on power; and the ethical period, focused on the individual's formation as a moral subject. But his work has continuity and it's homogenous so we can't speak about any fundamental thematic hiatus in his works, overall. Analyzing the way these themes articulate we shall notice that we cannot dissociate the theme of knowledge from the theme of power, as we cannot dissociate the theme of power relations from the theme of moral construction of the subject. As a contact point between the genealogical and the moral problem, we can identify a series of writings composing a type of biopolitics. We mainly speak about (but not only) his works *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the three parts of *The History of Sexuality*, about his course held at College of France (1978-1979), and published under the name *The Birth of Biopolitics*; and also, about a series of articles published in the second part of *Dits et écrits*.

Foucault realizes a criticism of power relations and also of a certain type of knowledge which supports a given type of structure for this power relations. By this criticism we must not understand the classical meaning of the term. He doesn't mean to judge or to evaluate, but to create spaces where new approaches for these

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subjects may emerge: *I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence*¹. A superficial understanding of this criticism conducted some researchers to label Foucault as an anarchist. But his writings don't tell us if a certain type of structure of power relations is or is not justified or legit; his criticism shows us the way that structure occurred, in its *historicity*. In this matter, the role of philosophy is in question: it must stop "*posing the question of power in terms of good and bad, but rather poses it in terms of existence. The question is not: is power good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate, a question of right or morality?*"². "What is power and which is power's relation to knowledge?"; "How and on what type of structures does the knowledge of power operate?" are some of the questions on which Foucault dwells: "*we should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful) that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that 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*"³. Power relations are present everywhere in modern and contemporary society, and each point where power is present becomes an object of knowledge. This happens in order to be able to obtain more efficient and optimized mechanisms which work to maintain a certain configuration of power relations.

It's interesting to note the way power manages to transform the individual, the way it engages him into power relations and integrates him, and more precisely determines him to take part in power relations and transform himself in order to be able to integrate into a certain type of configurational power relations. The subject is not an unconvertible entity which manages to remain indifferent to power relation's influence but the opposite: the subject is in a permanent state of becoming, of updating himself under the influence of power. But power does not only operate directly on individual's mental; it also uses his body as a contact surface, as a transfer surface of certain influences from the power towards individual's mental. This is the birth of what we can name *biopolitics*. The body becomes a subject of interest for knowledge, as it can be useful in increasing the efficiency of power relation activities, aiming to integrate the individual inside themselves.

The body is not treated as a distinct and central theme, but we can identify it in each of the three periods. From his text *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, we understand the importance that Foucault offers to the body. He argues that "*Genealogy ... is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body*". The genealogical history does not try arrange past events in order to

¹ Michel Foucault, *The masked philosopher in Subjectivity and Truth*, Edited by Paul Rabinow, Translated by Robert Hurley and others; *The essential work of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*; Volume one, The New Press, New York, 1997, p. 323.

² (PDF) *The Analytic Philosophy of Politics*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326085393_The_Analytic_Philosophy_of_Politics.

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, New York, 1995, p. 27.

justify the present configuration of power relations. By giving up the illusion of *continuity*, we create a space where a *diagnosis of the present*⁴ may emerge.

In fact, the body is a subject of interest and becomes an object of knowledge for the power dispositifs and mechanisms for two reasons, both equally important. One of those is the economic interest hidden beyond the wish to know and control the body, and the other reason is, as we've seen before, the psychological transformation of the individual needed in order to obtain politically obedient masses of people. Regarding the first point, we find a reference in an article about prison riots: “*in order to transform the body, its time and existence and in order to make him serve the production activity that capitalism was trying to implement, an entire mechanism of constraint was needed*”⁵ (our translation). The direction in which methods of correction of individual behavior have evolved, the new discourse in medical sciences and also the new concepts on sexuality, described by Foucault as new technics for maximizing life⁶, capture this new type of knowledge developed around our body. Although, apparently, the body manages to *escape history's influence*, in reality this is not so. Throughout power dispositifs, the body itself is transformed, its very nature changes: “*we are convinced that, regarding the body, it only obeys nature's laws, not being influenced by history. Error; again; Our body is caught in a series of regimes that reshape him, it's determined to get used to certain work, pause and holidays programs*”⁷ (our translation).

Therefore, the body is not only a contact surface, a surface on which power dispositifs act in order to transform individual's mental. The body is at the same time an object on which power applies its methods, and also a purpose for which power is employed.

Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* this phenomenon as a *political anatomy*: “*The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A “political anatomy”, which was also a “mechanics of power” was born*”⁸. In other words, the human body is analyzed, its mechanics becomes the subject of a certain type of knowledge which aims to understand mechanisms that can provide a more efficient functioning; it also aims to find out what can be done so that the human body becomes more useful from an economical and a political point of view. The problem identified by Foucault refers to the *dispositif's* hidden concern, to identify the best manner in which to treat human bodies in order to improve their economic efficiency and to make them more politically obedient.

Political anatomy is the one that “defines a procedure of subordination of bodies and forces that must increase the utility of power while practicing the economy of the prince”⁹. Political anatomy also realizes what Foucault describes as *individualizing technique of power* by folding to match each individual, by analyzing his body

⁴ Term used by M. Foucault in an interview with Claude Bonnefroy in 1968.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits I. 1954-1975*, Ed Gallimard, Paris, 2001, p. 1299.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *History of sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978, p. 123.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Theatrum philosophicum. Studii, eseuri, interviuri*, Trans. by B Gogdan Ghiu et al, Editura Casa Cărtii de Știință, Cluj Napoca, 2001, p. 195.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, New York, 1995, p. 138.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 208.

in order to influence one's behavior: "It's what I tend to entitle individualizing technique of power: a technology which points individual's bodies and behavior; it's roughly a certain type of political anatomy, an anatomopolitics"¹⁰ (our translation). Described so, the body becomes an important operator in every attempt to question different types of government techniques, domination or exercise of power. In order not to fall into interpretative errors when we speak about power, we shall strengthen the idea that Foucault understands power as a set of supra-individual relations, not as an independent entity¹¹. When he speaks about power he doesn't mean to underline a certain key feature as a core of power, but the way power works, and involves in its becoming process a certain type of knowledge.

In his work *Discipline and punish* and in his course held at College of France in 1972-1973, *The Punitive Society*, he analyzed how the dispositifs of power engage the human body, what types of discourse on the relation between power and the human body are accepted and promoted; he also realized a new history of hidden reasons behind society's new answers to crimes. So, if in the 17th century we were speaking about torture, the Enlightenment period brings a new approach regarding the human body. If torture was aiming to mark the body, beginning with the Enlightenment period, the human body is introduced in a different *mechanics of power*.

But regardless of the shape punishment takes, what is characteristic for both periods is the political interest associated with punishment: "We must regard the public execution, as it was still ritualized in the eighteenth century, as a political operation¹²", pointed towards showing, in a brutal way, the king's power. But empathy determines human sciences to produce a new type of discourse aiming to give a more acceptable shape to punishments: "This need for punishment without torture was first formulated as a cry from the heart or from an outraged nature. In the worst of murderers, there is one thing, at least, to be respected when one punishes: his humanity¹³."

However, Foucault argues that this change of attitude towards a convict's body comes from a new *economics* of power technique. This new attitude responds to new political and economic demands, avoiding useless efforts caused by torture, time lost by society members in order to assist to torture procedures, but also avoiding the risk of riots caused by empathy with the tortured human being. If the eighteenth century brings us a reform in this field, in order to understand the causes of this reform we must leave aside the humanistic sciences speech, and to search it in a new logics of power relations: "Throughout the eighteenth century, inside and outside the legal apparatus, in both everyday penal practice and the criticism of institutions, one sees the emergence of a new strategy for the exercise of the power to punish"¹⁴. Punishment, which will be transformed into prison sentences, is different from torture: they are two structurally different technologies.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Lumea e un mare azil. Studii despre putere*. Trans. by Bogdan Ghiu and Raluca Arsene, Ed. Design and Print, Cluj, 2005, p. 105.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits II. 1976-1988*, Ed Gallimard, Paris, 2001, p. 298.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, p. 53.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

If, by torture, king was trying to show his power explicitly, and power needed to leave marks on a convict's body, in punishment the body becomes a good that needs to be protected. Regarding this aspect, the economic interests of the ruling class influence this movement of strategies, justified by labor capacities needed. Another difference between punishment and torture consists in what each of them is against too. Torture was the response to crimes, physical violence, and disobedience toward the king as an act of revenge, while punishment was the answer towards a much more wider range of illegal things – such as crimes against property, vagrancy and other things for which torture was not employed: *The criminal is the social enemy and consequently punishment must be neither reparation for the harm done to the other, nor punishment of the offense, but a measure of protection, of counter-war that society takes against the criminal*¹⁵.

In *The punitive Society*, analyzing the evolution of punishment strategies, Foucault claims that there are four principles that can be observed: the first one is relativity towards society's needs, meaning that each society, depending on its needs in a certain historical period, can set up a new punishment strategy because there is no real connection between the punishment's intensity and the crime, but only between the social danger of the crime and the punishment's intensity. From this relation, a new principle regarding punishment's intensity arises. The punitive strategies tend to respond in balanced way, in accordance to risks posed to society by a certain crime, and they try to avoid any abuses of power which characterized torture's period. A third principle, maybe more important than the others, is the one of re-education in order to bring back the convict inside the social contract or, if not, to oversight the convict in order to stop representing a threat for other citizens. Neither he nor other persons that he might influence. The last principle of punitive strategies doesn't point towards the convict but towards other members of society who might repeat the convict's crime.

These principles lead to three different models of punishment¹⁶: *Infamy*, considered at that time the perfect model of punishment and the model where judicial power is dissolute into collective judgment. In this model the act of judgement is permanent and has transparency, the society doesn't need courts and the answer to crime is in accordance to social realities. The second model identified by Foucault is the one of *talion* where punishment is related, in its nature and force, to the crime committed. In this model society returns the attack in the same proportion to the prejudice suffered. The third model, the *slavery* one, points toward a reconciliation between the convict and society: the convict will offer a reparation to society by his work capacity. But none of these models manages to respond properly to the political and economic interests existing in a capitalist society. A new type of answer is demanded.

On this new answer we find clues in *Discipline and punish, the punitive society* and also in a series of articles published between 1975 and 1980. This new answer is the birth of the prison: "*The scaffold, where the body of the tortured criminal had been exposed to the ritually manifested force of the sovereign, the*

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, Ed. Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2015, p. 33.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 68-70.

*punitive theatre in which the representation of punishment was permanently available to the social body, was replaced by a great enclosed, complex and hierarchized structure that was integrated into the very body of the state apparatus*¹⁷. From a historical point of view things are clear regarding the birth of prisons. Beyond these, Foucault's interest points towards the real reasons behind this new type of answer to crimes. Finding these reasons will be possible after answering the next question: *how does the prison manage to answer in a more proper way to capitalist society's demands, better than the other type of answer identified in the eighteenth century?* Before answering this question, we must ask what's prison's distinctive characteristic comparing to others types of punishments? We find an answer to this question in *The Punitive Society*: *"The prison, in fact, is not a collective system like infamy, not graduated in its nature like talion, or reforming like forced labor. It is an abstract, monotonous, rigid punitive system that came to be imposed not only in reality, in the passage to realization, but in discourse"*¹⁸ in which *"penalty corresponds to the infraction, not in terms of reparation or exact adjustment, but in terms of quantity of time of liberty"*¹⁹.

As shown also in the juridical definition of prison, this type of punishment introduces the time of freedom as a price for the one committing crimes, in order to repair his mistake. Foucault considers that from this point of view there's a similarity between mechanisms involved in this form of punishment – prison, and the mechanism of salary. In other terms, while in a state of freedom an individual gets paid for his labor, for his invested time in a certain activity useful to society (wage/salary form), in prison the individual who commits a crime pays with his freedom, with years from his life. Another connection between wages and prison resides in the relation between fine and prison as punishments.

By prison *"for the first time in the history of penal systems, one no longer punishes through the body or through goods, but through time to live"*²⁰. While in the other punitive systems power was operating directly on human body, in the case of prison, the body becomes a tool used in order to take time of life from convicted person. All this transfer of interest from body to life time was, according to Foucault, due to political and economic interest in capitalist society. Time is now measured, depending on it the workers are paid, but is also the price to be paid by those who disrespect society's rules. While punitive regimes get modified, all the discourses regarding what needs to be punished also change. The increasing number of crimes against property, wasted labor force through vagrancy are seen now as crimes against society and need to be punished. All delinquents, whether they committed violent crimes, economic crimes or robberies, pay now the same price: time to live spent in prison.

From this point of view, the evolution of punishment and the new infractions that now need to be punished, don't come from a history of moral ideas but from a history of relations between political power and the human body, of ways power acts on bodies and uses bodies. This is what Foucault names the *microphysics of*

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, pp. 115-116.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society*, p. 70.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

power. This control of bodies shaped as an exercise, aims to obtain from humans, more efficient movements and actions: “in our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use ‘lenient’ methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission”²¹. But despite this local character of power, it is still subordinated to a global logic, which gives us many clues about society’s characteristics in a certain period of time and a certain area.

One of Foucault’s most important works on this topic, *Discipline and punish*, manages to explain a phenomenology of power relations in a punitive society and invites us to take a look in four different directions. The first one points towards changing perceptions on punishment mechanisms and offers more attention to the social function of punishments despite their repressive results. This is the reason why prison is still maintained as a punishment despite its modest results in reducing crimes. From this perspective, “Penality would then appear to be a way of handling illegalities, of laying down the limits of tolerance, of giving free rein to some, of putting pressure on others, of excluding a particular section, of making another useful, of neutralizing certain individuals and of profiting from others”²². Convicts become unwillingly servants of a system, of political parties which protects the interests of a dominant social class against workers and other social classes. Secondly, we are invited to analyze the punitive methods in a political and not a juridical context. The third one is oriented towards analyzing what the history of social systems and juridical sciences have in common. We shall understand from this that humanization of punishments and the conscience we have about ourselves must be understood as results of mechanisms of power. The last of Foucault’s objectives in this specific approach on political anatomy is to determine whether *entry of the soul on the penal justice scene* is not somehow a different and evolved way used by power mechanisms to control the human body.

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²¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish*, p. 23.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 252.