MICHEL FOUCAULT (1926-1984)

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 the French theorist, a physician’s son and professor at several major universities. Yet his work also shows strong continuity with ideas of the conservative reaction, Comte and Durkheim, a French tradition that de-emphasizes the individual and highlights the compelling and external character of culture.

Foucault’s ideas evolved through a series of books, including *Madness and Civilization*; *Discipline and Punish*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and *The History of Sexuality*. The titles recall Durkheim’s *Suicide* and his work on crime and punishment: like Durkheim, Foucault focused on deviance and on acts and conditions that appear to be highly personal and individually unique—sex and Insanity—and was intent on showing that these apparently individual behaviours can only be understood by examining prevailing cultural frameworks, “discursive formations.”

A discursive formation is a way of representing the nature of society and human beings. It is a framework of words and images through which we see ourselves at any point in time. These words and images are shared by the entire society (and by groups of societies like the “West”). In some societies they are said to be religious, while in others they claim to be scientific. In all cases, the discursive formations are systems of knowledge, claims to understand the nature of human beings and the world in which we live. Historical change involves change in discursive formations, major shifts from one to another form.

A discursive formation is a set of round holes into which the unpredictable, multi-shaped pegs of human experience are crammed. The round holes define what is “normal” and “deviant,” “sane” and “insane,” “natural” and “unnatural.” These terms have to be put in quotation marks because they have no intrinsic meaning. The cramming of human acts and experiences into the categories of the discursive formation always involves exercise of power and enactment of punishments. It is always met by some degree of resistance.

For example, human sexuality is nothing more than bodies and pleasures. It has no intrinsic organization. The discursive formations of successive epochs impose categories such as “good” and “evil,” “natural” and “unnatural,” “virtuous” and “sinful” on these experiences. They are claims to knowing and classifying the true nature of sexuality. In classical antiquity, sexuality was believed to be an expression of dominance; penetration
was seen as an act of dominance, engaged in by adult men with women, slaves, and/or adolescent boys of the men's own social class. There was some ambivalence about the boys, because they were going to mature into a category of social equals, unlike women and slaves. Christian teachings radically rearranged the categories and the meaning of the acts, defining all same-sex relations as "sinful."

Foucault's analysis of madness is similar. In all ages, some people's behaviour fails to fit a norm. The mad may be allowed to roam around freely or, as in modern times until the 1970s, they may be placed in prison-like insane asylums. They may be defined in religious terms or, in modern times, subjected to medical analysis and treatment.

The definition of crime and the punishments it receives also vary. In the period of European history before the French Revolution, criminals were punished by corporal and capital punishment, subjected to gruesome tortures, and exhibited in public spectacles. The Enlightenment and French Revolution marked the start of new ways of thinking about crime and punishment. After this turning point, criminals were incarcerated, separated, and isolated from society. Emerging human sciences such as medicine, psychology, and sociology claimed to understand the causes of crime and to be able to effect rehabilitation, the transformation of the character and behaviour of criminals. The emphasis shifted to corrections and the imposition of order and self-control on the imprisoned criminal.

Foucault saw these changes in the treatment of the mad and the criminal as a central feature of the modern discursive formation, characterized by the dominance of the sciences—biology, psychology, sociology—and by the translation of these disciplines' claims into fields of practice such as medicine, psychotherapy, and social work. All these fields constitute disciplines of power; that is, they are focused on the imposition of order, regulation of behaviour, and social control. Technologies of all kinds—medication, electroshock, lobotomies, behaviour modification, management practices, and computerized surveillance and record keeping—are put to the service of control. Like all systems of power, these disciplines employ a "gaze," a form of scrutiny exercised by those with power upon those without power. Doctors examine patients, psychotherapists look at the mad and the troubled, educators monitor children: these are all examples of surveillance.

Modern formations are characterized by increasing emphasis on self-monitoring and self-control. The ideal modern person suppresses impulses of all kinds, especially sexual, violent, and unruly ones. The gaze of surveillance is turned upon oneself, and this self-scrutiny is the most pervasive and effective form of social control. If people cannot monitor and curb impulses on their own, they turn to physicians and helping professions for treatment.
In short, knowledge in modern times is organized in terms of scientific claims, rather than religious judgements, and power is exercised in the context of expertise and scientific knowledge. The “gaze” is always a detached, affectively neutral, scientific gaze—the gaze of the researcher and the dispassionate diagnostician.

Foucault’s analysis of changes in surveillance and punishment appears similar to Durkheim’s conclusion that a historical transition has taken place from repressive to restitutive law. Durkheim was moderately optimistic about evolution toward more humane and less rigid systems of social control, but Foucault had a more ambiguous position. While in no way advocating a return to physically brutal forms of control, he insisted that constraint and regulation are present in all regimes of knowledge and power. “Liberty is a practice” and therefore it has not been achieved or guaranteed by more humane and rationalistic forms of control.¹

Foucault sees society in ways that are similar to the ideas of the conservative reaction, Comte and Durkheim, but turns each of their values upside-down. The conservative reaction celebrated social compulsion; Foucault loathes it in both its traditional and modern forms. Comte hailed the emergence of the human sciences, the exercise of expertise, and the prospect of order and progress; Foucault attacks them. Durkheim believed modern structures of normative regulation are more humane than old ones; Foucault sees them as new forms of control. He agrees with the French tradition of analyzing the external and compelling character of culture. He also shares its perspective on crime and social deviance, in which these phenomena are not seen as social problems, but as fundamental expressions of society.

Foucault’s ideas are close to Weber’s concerns about the iron cage of formal rationality and instrumental reason. Like Weber, he foresees a society in which rationality becomes a repressive and inhumane force. Science’s claim to the complete understanding of nature gives its practitioners a hold on human action that is hard to break. Both Weber and Foucault were influenced by the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, a nineteenth-century critic of liberal rationalism.

We can see many parallels between Foucault’s theories and Goffman’s perspective. Both were interested in the micro-politics of power, in control and resistance at the level of interactions. Both focused on mental disorders as the extreme paradigm of disorder that is classified and controlled in society. In contemporary societies, but not others, mental disorders are believed to be illnesses to be diagnosed and treated. In the eyes of both Foucault and Goffman, the apparently benign and helpful human sciences—especially psychiatry and psychology—are systems of surveillance and discreditation of selves.

Both Foucault and Goffman have an underlying Durkheimian understanding of society as discourses and practices (Foucault) or scripts and frames
(Goffman) that limit thought and constitute selves. Though at one level, the self appears active and manipulative, at another level, it is only acting out the discourses or scripts dictated in its social and historical setting. Both theorists are interested in the body and its mortification in acts of social control, as well as the manipulation of anomalous or stigmatized body-selves. In short, they share a perspective on the “dark side” of mental disorder, mortification, incarceration, stigma, marginalization of “deviants,” frames or discourses that structure thinking, and the complicity of professionals in the destruction of selves.

Foucault confronts two other social theorists, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. His work on sexuality is a direct challenge to Freud’s view that each individual’s self is formed around repressed and unconscious infantile sexual impulses. Freud’s view implies that there is a “true self,” and that psychoanalysis can uncover it, restoring a person to health in the process. The person can never, of course, return to the world of infantile sexuality, but he or she can, at least, understand how they were forced out of Paradise. Foucault does not believe there is such a thing as the true self, nor is there a consistent, universally human process of repressing infantile sexual impulses. Sexuality is a cultural product, varying among cultures. It has no true form, repressed, infatiate, or whatever. The subject—each individual’s sense of self—is constituted by processes of power and knowledge within a discursive formation. The concept of an inner self, formed by repression of sexual impulses but accessible with the help of a psychoanalyst, is the target of Foucault’s attack in The History of Sexuality.

Foucault challenges Marx in several ways. First, Foucault believes power is exercised at many sites; the mode of production is certainly one of them, but not necessarily the determining or most important one. Power is not lodged only or primarily in a distinct social group, the ruling class, or even in a definable category such as the economically dominant class. Second, resistance is omnipresent, not focused in a movement, let alone one led by the proletariat. Like power, resistance appears always and everywhere. Power is always met by resistance, and the two processes appear throughout the formation. Resistance is as strong in the university lecture halls, in school, at the office water cooler, in bed, in prison, in the mental hospital day room, and at the rock concert as it is on the factory floor or the socialist party headquarters. It is an ongoing micro-process, with no particular endpoint. Third, Foucault shared the view of many other French intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s: the effort to channel resistance into an oppositional movement of proletarians against capitalism had disastrous consequences—The Party and the State. Foucault was writing at a time of growing disillusionment among left-wing intellectuals with real socialism in the Soviet bloc and China and growing disengagement from the Western European Communist Parties. He was politically active in the prisoners’ rights movement in France, supporting the civil rights of the incarcerated.
Sharing Marx’s vision of human emancipation, he did not pursue it in contemporary Marxist theory and practice, but in a more individual and anarchic perspective of the outsider and deviant.

Foucault’s work revolutionized social theory. Its radical social constructionism, the paired concepts “power and knowledge,” the critique of the human sciences, and the idea that resistance is a pervasive phenomenon—these elements of Foucault’s thought became incorporated into feminist theory, revisions in Marxist theory, and mainstream cultural studies.

Both Foucault readings are from Discipline and Punish (actually Surveiller et Punir, in the French title). They reveal his method, which is extremely unconventional. He proceeds by investigating unusual and bizarre historical materials, reconstructing the histories of deviance and punishment with fragmentary, quasi-anecdotal evidence that highlights those phenomena he believes are most important; for example, accounts of a particularly bizarre murder, gruesome details of an execution, records of a reform school, personal memoirs of a hermaphrodite. These strange, unsystematically accumulated details are like the intense light of a search beam, thrown back into the darkness of history, illuminating key elements of landscapes of deviance, crime, madness, and punishment.

In the first reading, Foucault shows us images of the Before and After, the shift from pre-modern to modern punishment. In a pre-modern situation, the attempted regicide, Robert Damien, is torn apart in a horrifying public spectacle of torture and execution. After the French Revolution, punishment is replaced by “corrections”; the timetable of a reformatory exemplifies the new order. The deviant is hidden away, incarcerated in a prison or insane asylum. Order is imposed on an unruly body, every motion is prescribed and monitored. Control over the deviant’s time is essential to the imposition of order; every minute of the day is accounted for. The deviant is subjected to constant surveillance.

In the second reading, Foucault uses the metaphor of the “Panopticon,” an imaginary institution of total and constant surveillance, as an image of modern society. The gaze of the monitors can be turned upon all inmates at all times, eventually inducing them to monitor themselves.

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