

Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison by Michel Foucault Book Summary

Discipline and Punish focus on Western societies, especially France and England. But by looking at a history of penalty systems, it also theorizes how power runs in society, especially how people are trained in “right” behavior. If we grasp how prisons operate we can begin to understand the very basics of society today. Foucault seeks to analyze the penalty system in its social context and to try to explore how changing power relations affected punishment.

The late 1700s through mid-1800, history of changing attitudes toward and practices of punishing crime gave way to private punishment of the soul.

On 2 March 1757, the streets of Paris had an unpleasant spectacle.

Robert-François Damiens, a domestic servant, was publicly executed before a baying mob for his trying to kill the French king, Louis XV.

Damiens was to be divided into four equal parts: his limbs were pulled by four horses driven in the opposite side. But when the arms and legs refused to detach from Damiens' body, the executioner got out his knife and sheared through the tendons and tissue before the horses completed the dismemberment.

But the execution was the last of its kind. In the eighteenth century in Europe, punishment as a public spectacle wasn't current practice. Instead, a different way to punishment became

the new standard. It was re-designed. Now it happens behind closed doors and its workings were set to a timetable. It was about the aim of training people into correct behavior.

In the nineteenth century, fewer than a hundred years after Damians' execution, the new penal style was codified in texts such as French politician Léon Faucher's rules "for the House of young prisoners in Paris."

At five in the morning, their day just started, when they were woken up by repeated cracks on a drum. By quarter to six, they were at work. They ate their food at ten. Teaching began at twenty minutes to eleven. They worked again from one o'clock until seven. Then, at half past seven, the cells were locked for a night curfew.

In prison, the nature of punishment is taken away from social view rather than publicly displayed. It was no longer a public indication of the will of sovereign governmental powers. It was now one in which bureaucratic penalties were fused with defined imprisonments and stringent schedules. It was to reform someone's entire personality in order to prevent crime in the future.

Where once corporal punishment and pain had been central to ideas of punishment, now there had been a transition from a focus on the body to a focus on the soul.

It's very easy to think – as many historians have – that this represents some sort of development, that the declining severity of punishment indicates a humane advance.

But the author thinks they have the wrong end of the stick. The purpose of punishment had changed. The objective was no longer thinking of crime as an injury. It was now to target hearts and minds, thoughts and will. It needs to be reformed in order for the code to be repaired.

**Inquisition, torture, and execution were
central to both punishment and investigation**

in society, while public punishment underlined a sovereign's power as ritual and a ceremony.

The new method to punishment at the end of the eighteenth century did not spontaneously materialize. There was an idea behind it. The philosophers of the Enlightenment had become offensive about the use of torture as a hangover from a "Gothic" age when cruelty and savagery were the standards.

Of course, torture had not been seen as extremely barbarous at the time. It was, in fact, heavily regimented as a form of science, right down to the length of ropes that were used, or even the frequency with which a given torture mechanism should be applied.

On top of that, torture wasn't just part of the penalty system. It was also seen as a core point of criminal investigation. If an official was going to pry into your business, you were probably going to get tortured because so much weight was ascribed to confession, even if it was coerced. It was considered proof in and of itself. No other evidence was needed.

Simply put, judicial torture was analogous with the looking for truth.

There was a side effect to this: investigation and punishment became one and the same, and thus torture became a central point of both.

Following a criminal conviction, public execution of justice generally had two different functions. On the one hand, it served a judicial purpose, but there was also a political element: the public carrying out of justice showed the power of the supreme ruler.

Every crime was taken as a personal attack on the supreme ruler, and so the enforcement of the law was, in return, testimony to his will. Under such a system, a supreme ruler could even call for the spectacle of having a criminal killed. It was an indication that the supreme ruler reigned supreme over the juridical apparatus: it was his system alone and justice was dispensed in his name.

An audience at a public execution, showing everybody that a certain criminal was, in fact, a criminal and that he atones for his sins. It was about witnesses and guarantors of a sovereign's authority. After all, the idea of a spectacle is that it has spectators.

Move from torture to incarceration, while investigation sought the right reason behind it.

By the end of the eighteenth century, calls for more “humane” forms of punishment could be on the stage. Public executions and torture were seen no longer addresses a criminal act: the general feeling was that the breaking of a criminal’s body as a demonstration of sovereign power was no longer acceptable.

A new system of punishment would have to be encouraged. The watchword was “humanity,” and it was to be the “measure” of a given punishment.

Despite those noble words, however, the new system of justice was, in practice, not a massive improvement.

The new system included new methods for an investigation. Since the Middle Ages, the purpose of criminal investigation had been sole to establish whether a punishable act had been committed.

However, by the end of the eighteenth century, that was no longer deemed enough. Now it became essential to determine why an act of criminal had taken place. Was it a “perverse action,” a “delusional episode,” or perhaps even a “psychotic reaction”?

A criminal investigation was now viewed as a “scientific-juridical complex.” This was a bundled mass of diagnoses ascertained by psychiatric and psychological experts for the

intention of determining whether a prison or a mental hospital was the most acceptable place for the accused.

Needless to say, this change in the focus of investigation also impacted the nature of punishment. Power shifted from the sovereign to the public at large; punishment was now an expression of public power. This was because the power of judgment held by a judge representing the sovereign had now been transferred and split between multiple authorities such as psychiatrists and psychologists.

Equally, a crime was now seen as an offense against society at large rather than solely against the sovereign. An individual crime was a wound inflicted on the social body; the purpose of punishment was to cauterize.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought a new challenge the building of disciplinary concepts.

For the author, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries encircle what he terms the classical age.

The way is prepared for the prison by the developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the disciplines changed. Individual punishment was no longer portrayed as exemplary for the wider public. Instead, criminal individuals were transformed into docile bodies, to be “subjected, used, transformed, improved.” Discipline is a series of methods by which the body's operations can be controlled.

There were four main aspects of this new system of discipline.

First off, there was the art of distributions.

This involved apportioning criminals' bodies into certain types of space. This began with enclosure; the use of spaces like military dormitory was fairly common. But it went further. The collective was broken up, and individuals themselves sectioned off into smaller spaces. Architecture could work for this purpose. Just think of the monastic cell, no doubt an inspiration.

Secondly, control of activity was a part of the disciplinary apparatus.

In effect, this meant timetables. They established rhythm, regularity, and repetition. Once again, discipline took a page out of religion's book; religious institutions such as monasteries were worthy precursors in the regulation of time and discipline.

Thirdly, there was an organization of geneses. Don't be put off by the name. It simply means that one's individuality was increasingly molded through strict procedures and activities. The only way to progress up the ranks of an established hierarchy was to partake in and success a carefully defined completion of tasks. This sequencing of tasks was called seriation.

Educational programs were one example. Students passed through ranks of seniority by a tightly defined process of training and examination. As a consequence, individuals were subsumed into a greater whole through organizational structures.

Finally, there was a composition of forces. The idea was that the means of discipline would not just control individuals' activities and how their time was organized. Discipline would also control their collective behavior. The structure of every individual's forces would, therefore, brings an efficient machine operating as a social body.

This was related to ideas that had first surfaced during the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century. Individuals' bodies were viewed as cogs in organized structures of production. What mattered was how many people there were and where they were placed, rather than their individual strength or prowess. New disciplinary methods applied that concept in a new context.

Disciplinary power has three principles: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination.

As disciplinary machinery developed over the course of the seventeenth century, it became evident that its power primarily lay in three areas.

The first element was hierarchical observation. Observation and the gaze are key elements of power. This means that systems of coercion were enforced through invasive monitoring. Paragons for this sort of behavior and exercise of power had long been in place. By these practices, and through the human sciences, the notion of the norm developed. The military camp is a case in point.

In the "perfect camp," each individual forms part of a hierarchical network of individuals all watching over each other. Disciplinary power is based on a complex system of cross-monitoring, the efficiency of which is further increased by the deployment of geometry, right down to how tents are pitched. A captain's tent, for instance, is most likely going to look out onto his inferiors' quarters.

Over time, the structures of military camps were also applied to working-class housing estates, hospitals and schools.

Consequently, architecture became part of the arsenal of discipline. Buildings were designed so that what went on inside could be seen with ease from the outside. It had acquired a new function beyond practicality and aesthetics.

The building of the *École* in Paris is emblematic of these methods: it is nothing short of an "observatory." Pupils' individual dormitories were arranged down a corridor, along which, at regular distances, were officers' quarters. In addition, a window facing onto the corridor in each student's room meant each felt he could be observed at all times.

The second disciplinary element was normalizing judgment. Simply put, this meant the increasing exercise of power through standards rather than through individual whim. So, in

fields such as medicine or education, grades and ranks were given based on assessment of aptitude. A hierarchy was created. Punishment in these circumstances often involved repeated efforts to meet these new standardized norms.

Finally, there was examination. Individuals were reduced to the status of “cases” that were to be looked over. Hospitals were the prime articulation of this new approach. They became sites where patients were subject to continuous examination under a doctor’s control.

Schools were no different. Arithmetic, spelling, handwriting and grammar were all subjects to be measured so that norms could be reinforced.

As Bentham’s Panopticon said, a building that shows how individuals can be supervised and controlled efficiently by a feeling of surveillance.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the plague was ravaging Europe. Any town that suspected the pestilence had come knocking went into lockdown. For reasons of safety, having discipline was essential.

To begin with, every family was ordered, on pain of death, to stay home. An official, known as a syndic, was appointed to surveil all streets, locking every door as he went.

It was the syndic’s duty to visit his street each day and shout up to the inhabitants of each house. If they didn’t appear at the window, then he knew something was up; most likely they were incapacitated by the plague or already dead.

The syndic then gave his report to town officials called intendants, who passed news on to the magistrates.

As the chain of command signifies, what had been created was a refined system of surveillance. The irony here is that the chaos of disease had unusually allowed for the development of a model of control. Moreover, it was a paradigm that went on to inspire some of these towns' inhabitants, who themselves later became politicians. They dreamed of creating a perfectly disciplined and governed society.

There is a common feature present in manufactured, disciplined societies of this type: a feeling of being permanently surveilled.

We can see what this might have looked like in architectural form in the eighteenth-century Panopticon, a thought-experiment the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham finalized in 1787.

The Panopticon is a donut-shaped building. At its center stands a tower. Its windows face outward, toward the donut's inner surface. The building itself is divided into cells, which each extend from the inner to the outer ring. The cells have two windows, one at either end. One faces the tower, the other points outward.

The overall effect of such an arrangement is that the inmates – one to a cell – have a sense of being continuously watched. Because of this feeling, they behave as if they are being watched all the time, irrespective of whether or not they actually are. You can see it's quite different in design from the earlier dungeons.

Prisons were created to deprive liberty and ready individuals for discipline in the modern age.

In the modern era, there is nothing unusual about the idea of prisons. They seem quite natural to us, an obvious solution to dealing with crime. Crime still happens; criminal people still get released without being completely "reformed."

But things were different at the start of the nineteenth century. Imprisonment as a punishment was novel. It took time for its position as the primary form of punishment to become established. But it triumphed in the end, and there were some good reasons to have this one.

To begin with, prison was now seen as a means by which to strip a criminal of his liberty. The construction of prisons was, therefore, contingent on the existence of societies where liberty was understood as a universal right – at least to those who were considered full members of society.

As a consequence, the deprivation of liberty was considered the egalitarian punishment, and prison the means by which it could be enacted.

There are further benefits to prison as a form of punishment: the degree of penalty can be varied and accurately measured that depends on the time: by days, months and years.

Of course, there is more to prison than the stripping of liberty alone. It also presents an opportunity for “correction” and moral improvement for incarcerated criminals. Isolation and solitude became the method for chastisement and reformation.

The idea was that a criminal left alone with his punishment and the memory of his crime would learn to dislike very strongly his action. He would be beset and overwhelmed by remorse. Consequently, it would be his own conscience that effected the transformation.

On top of solitude, convicts were assigned prison work. Once more, the idea was supposedly that this would reform their characters. However, the author questions the real purpose of forced labor. Nothing of economic benefit was being produced, nor did convicts acquire actual working skills. What they did learn, though, was how to be absorbed into the regimen of production, and to become part of the apparatus of an industrialized society.

The criminal was, in this sense, no different from any other disciplined agent in the modern age.

Book Review

It is an intense work of philosophy and sociology and anyone who's interested in should spend some time reading it. Instead of targeting the body of the criminal, his soul could become the main point of punishment. The transformation happens after reforming the soul instead of punishing the body. Disciplined and regimented methods handled industrial age. The prison is not alone in the focus point. It is linked to a whole series of "carceral mechanisms" — "intended to cure, to alleviate pain, to comfort and etc.

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