

## Prison as Paradox: Foucault and the Disciplinary Society

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In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault lays bare the disciplinary mechanisms that produce cultural realities. He systematically examines the fabric of perceived “realities,” and from this observation weaves a theory about their construction and propagation. He describes these disciplinary mechanisms chiefly as being “micro-physics” (p. 139), “cellular power” (p. 143), and “the instrumental coding of the body” (p. 153), which dynamically function in concert with one another to discipline cultural reality. Central to Foucault’s thesis is the notion of panopticism – whereby disciplined concepts of right and wrong, the normal and abnormal, are enforced and reinforced by way of self-surveillance. He looks to Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon to construct his extended analogy; the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher-architect proposed a revolutionary design for prisons that could also be applied to schools, clinics, and other social institutions: a central guard tower with one-way windows could peer simultaneously into all of the inmates’ cells, making it impossible for the imprisoned to discern when exactly they were being watched. Therefore, they must always behave as though they were being watched, internalizing disciplined behavior and acting in accord with it. But this efficient disciplinary arrangement can be extrapolated even beyond these particular establishments; indeed, it can be used to describe the wholesale creation of societal institutions – cultural realities themselves (p. 194). Foucault calls this society permeated by discipline “the disciplinary society” (p. 209). Is it not appropriate, then, to call us prisoners of our cultural realities,

and of the disciplinary society? And if this is so, can we ever escape? I critique the very foundation of such a question, recontextualizing its implications in light of Foucault's own views on "discipline" and "prison." Perhaps our prisons should not be escaped, but embraced as vessels for change.

First, allow me to address more thoroughly the notion of cultures (i.e., cultural realities) as "prisons." Foucault's outlining of an efficient disciplinary regime demonstrates the way that perceptions of right and wrong, the ordinary and the strange, are *artificially ingrained* within social bodies (p. 209). He further asserts that these mechanisms manufacture individuals themselves: "It is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies" (p. 217). Thus, Foucault's analysis cuts directly into "culture" and what surely must comprise it, namely, ideas about what constitutes the normal and the abnormal, and the composition of the individuals that together form a basis for "culture."

The panoptic effect, he says, "[induces] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). He goes on, "[the inmate] inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles [the prisoner and the guard]; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (pp. 202–203). This is to say that individuals surveil themselves – become guards of the prisons in which they are confined – and through their self-surveillance, (re)produce arbitrarily disciplined norms and taboos. Yes, clearly the individual panoptic experience is prison-like – but that is perhaps not the great prison of which we speak. If these disciplinary mechanisms describe all cultural creation, it would seem that no people

place is absent from them. The “disciplinary society” (p. 209) envelopes all cultures, because all cultures were fabricated by the same mechanisms. Fleeing one culture (whatever this means) and relocating to another is not an escape from the mechanisms of the disciplinary society; those operate there, too, as they would anywhere else. This, I contend, is the prison with which we must grapple.

In addressing the “disciplinary society” at large – the great prison – I have so far left these terms unevaluated. It is obvious, at least at the lay level, that they carry with them a great deal of baggage. “Discipline” (and its conjugations) and “prison” are words with negative popular connotations, and hence, this is something from which we must escape, or face certain peril. But I do not accept that the two are necessarily negative – and neither did Foucault. “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 ‘conceals’” (p. 194). The exercise of power – i.e., in the disciplinary society – is not inherently nefarious or oppressive. Indeed, this regime of disciplinary techniques has a wide array of applications: “[I]t serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work” (p. 207). The mechanisms themselves (micro-physics, cellular power, instrumental coding) are amoral, and they may be put to many uses – each in the interest of efficiency. Therefore I take issue with the question, although rhetorically posed, of “escaping” this panoptic “prison” for the simple reason that I do not believe we are obliged to find an escape route. The “prison,” I submit, is not necessarily a societal ill that hopelessly entraps us all.

There is a reason that Foucault was an activist for radical causes. The “Panopticon,” the “disciplinary society,” does not rigidly confine cultures; it does not prevent out-of-hand any and all revisions that might be made to them. We understand that “cultures” are not static, but complex and in flux, as reflected by our own hard-pressed efforts to define them. Cultural realities are manufactured not by some external force, but by us – collectively – via the exercise of power as we propagate these disciplinary mechanisms. Because power is not something to be wielded, but exercised (p. 215), we have the ability to alter our cultural realities, our “prisons,” to craft them according to our own standards, in our own image. Thus, the prisons in which we live are paradoxically the greatest tools to carve out new and empowered spaces for cultural expression. I quoted Foucault as saying that we are our own prison guards, but how ironically liberating. Yes, we are our own prison guards, guarding prisons of our own making. And if we are their architects, can we not erect them anew?

## Reference

Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books:  
New York. Print.