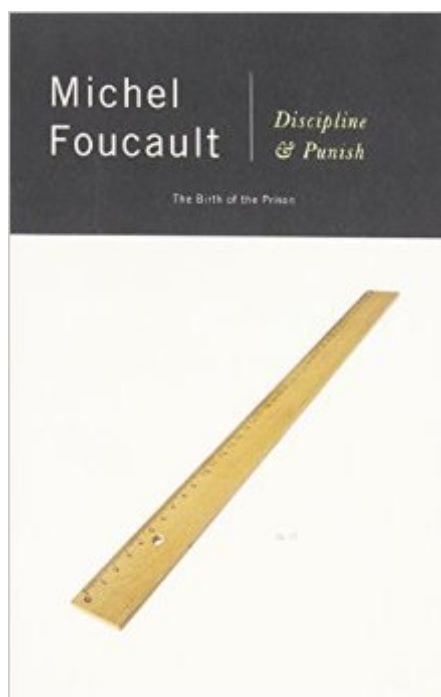


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Discipline & Punish: The Birth Of The Prison



Synopsis

In this brilliant work, the most influential philosopher since Sartre suggests that such vaunted reforms as the abolition of torture and the emergence of the modern penitentiary have merely shifted the focus of punishment from the prisoner's body to his soul.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book is no more about the history of prisons than the fable of the rabbit and hare is about animal competition. Foucault is writing about the power of normalization in western society. Within five minutes of my residence there are two large Texas state prisons. The offenders incarcerated in these facilities exist in a network of interlocking disciplinary mechanisms, mechanisms that Foucault unveils in this book. The criminal justice system, the prison environment, the educational/training opportunities available during incarceration, parolee supervision, and the limited employment options on release all coordinate to encapsulate the offender's life. The offender's agency is significantly impaired for the balance of his life regardless of his domiciliary. I live in a master planned, suburban community subject to a detailed and lengthy list of deed restrictions. These deed restrictions dictate the colors that I can paint my house, the height to which my grass can grow, the type of trees that I can plant in the front yard as well as the insistence that I plant three trees in my front yard. My wife and I have had to paint the front door twice in the last four years to comply with homeowner association threats, and we have been chastised for offenses as "severe" as leaving a hose uncoiled for too long in the front yard. Now I admit that there is a modicum of agency in my decision to live in this specific community; however, just like the offenders incarcerated nearby, I live

in a network of interlocking disciplinary mechanisms. I contend that my agency is also significantly impaired. The difference between my life and the offender's life is one of degree, not kind. This is the message Foucault communicates with both style and substance in this book.

This book has been described as Foucault's masterpiece, and for good reason. Through this "genealogy" of history, Foucault shows us how modern society has become penal and coercive in nature; and perhaps more importantly, that all us now live in the midst of an abstract, authoritative public "gaze." Although the book traverses a lot of historical ground, Foucault's discussion culminates in an analysis of Jeremy Bentham's prison concept. Bentham, the founder of Utilitarianism philosophy, believed that individual rights are subordinate to the state. In fact, he went so far as to call them "nonsense on stilts." As long as the government protected its people and treated them decently, he did not believe that the polity could be accused of oppressing its citizen - be they convicts or otherwise. Thus, Bentham was the first philosopher to give the modern penal system its rational underpinnings. Today, we take it as a matter of course that those who do not conform to laws are trucked off to prison. But with this book, Foucault attempts to completely undermine our intuitive sense of what is right, what is coercive, what is rational, and ultimately what is true. Perhaps better than any other author out there, Foucault shows us the subtle madness of Western institutional logic. Foucault focused on Bentham's prison model, or the Panopticon as Bentham called it - which literally means, that which sees all. The Panopticon prison, which was popular in the early nineteenth century, was designed to allow guards to see their prisoners, but not allow prisoners to see guards. The building was circular, with prisoner's cells lining the outer diameter, and in the center of the circle was a large, central observational tower.

Reviewers are right about this book tracing the origins of the modern surveillance state back to the birth of the modern prison system but they are not mentioning the prime motive for this that Foucault points to: profit and capitalism. With the rise of industrial society it was more important to regiment and discipline the masses than 'off with their head' or hands. The panopticon prison idea was taken to the factory and service industry by industrial giants like Carnegie and Rockefeller and the fruits of this profitable perversion can be seen all over society today: delivery drivers monitored throughout the day by GPS, social security cards, public schooling (founded by the same industrial giants) intellectual and psychological grading, job placement and conformity, credit ratings, licences needed to do everything but go to the bathroom, a growing snitch culture... Foucault's major thesis is that surveillance (discipline) aids profit and any deviation from profit leads to state-sanctioned

punishment in the form of increased surveillance. As industry and profits increase so will the surveillance and discipline that make it run smoothly. Every facet of modern society works to this end. The irony is, as techno-pundits like McLuhan later pointed out, in the modern world the prisoner with a tv set has as much denatured freedom as the tycoon in his guarded estate and they enjoy a lot of the same things in a world where pleasure is increasingly programmed and vicarious; in a world that has turned from the moral order to the profit order, where bad credit today is the profit order version of the ancient moral order idea of excommunication. Everything that stands in the way of the profit order, whether it be an idea, person, religion, or country is attacked.

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