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Self-Overcoming in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*

LADELLE McWHORTER

Prisons are veritable universities of crime. Within them young offenders learn both the values and the techniques of hardened criminals. In addition to these lessons in professional ethics and theory, aspiring criminals also get hands-on experience within prison walls, for prisons are also centers of criminal activity: drug and arms trafficking, rape, gang warfare, and murder. And, like all good universities, prisons help their proteges make the contacts they need to further their budding careers.

Few will disagree that our prison system, along with its subsidiary mechanisms, produces the conditions under which delinquency can spread and flourish. But Michel Foucault's assertion in *Discipline and Punish* is far stronger than that. Foucault is not just reiterating the familiar claim that prisons produce a medium for the development of delinquency, rather, he is claiming that our disciplinary society actually produces the delinquent self in its very being.

It is said that the prison fabricated delinquents; it is true that it brings back, almost inevitably, before the courts those who have been sent there. But it also fabricates them in the sense that it has introduced into the operation of the law and the offence, the judge and the offender, the condemned man and the executioner, the non-corporeal reality of the delinquency that links them together and, for a century and a half, has caught them in the same trap.¹

Delinquency itself—as a functional locus within a discourse but also as a possible form of selfhood, as a way of being, as a way of being known and of knowing oneself—arose simultaneously with and is sustained and

perpetuated by what Foucault calls the *carceral system*. Delinquency and the prison system are the twin offspring of the same series of events, the same movement of power.

Foucault offers two sorts of evidence for his assertion that the very being of the delinquent is a product of a certain series of events within a network of power. First, he notes the lack of the figure of the delinquent prior to the dramatic rise in the use of incarceration as a form of punishment in Western Europe. Before the advent of prison systems with their internal hierarchies and structures of correction and their attendant psychiatric and medical knowledges and practices, legal proceedings and techniques of punishment focused primarily on an act or series of acts. Criminality was merely a matter of action, not a state of being, and punishment was its counteraction. But as a carceral system develops, we find that the central focus of judicial administration is not action, but rather self, the true being of the one who acts offensively. Actions are considered only insofar as they function to initiate contact between the delinquent and the correctional system and insofar as they are understood to be the true expression of an underlying reality. Delinquency functions as the name of that reality.

In addition to delinquency's absence prior to the widespread use of imprisonment to punish offenders, Foucault offers another piece of evidence to support his notion that delinquency is produced within a certain configuration of power relations. He points out how very useful delinquency is and, as a result, how very invested in its existence certain mechanisms of power are.

Delinquency is indirectly useful because it represents such an improvement over popular, sporadic unlawfulness. The existence of a class of people who claim illegality as their own prerogative necessarily limits the unlawful activity of the general population. Once delinquency was defined and reified, a sorting process could occur. Delinquents, unlike sporadically rowdy citizens, could be identified, watched, and managed.

Delinquency also has its direct uses. Occasionally delinquents have been used as a population and labor force to colonize conquered territories. More often, they have been used as a sort of covert labor force at home, available for employment by legitimate private businesses or various state agencies to work on the fringes of legality—as smugglers, prostitutes, odds-makers, informants, and spies. A prominent example from recent history of the direct use of delinquency by a legitimate agency is the C.I.A.'s employment of General Manuel Noriega and his underlings in Central America. But we need not look to the sensational case for corroboration of Foucault's claim. We need only consider how often prostitutes are used in the negotiation of business deals or petty thugs are employed by collection agencies. Delinquents perform valued

services that result in power and profits for people whose own reputations are clean.

Delinquents are not only legally marginal laborers; they are also auxiliary police. Crime normalizes. Crime in the ghettos keeps racial and ethnic minorities frightened and disorganized; thus they cannot effectively challenge the oppression perpetrated against them by dominant social groups. The existence of thugs and thieves who confine themselves primarily to ethnic and working class neighborhoods helps to determine property values and thereby ensures continued segregation by race and class. Rapists help keep women in our "place" by literally curtailing our activities and by making us feel dependent upon the protection of men.²

But beyond their use as terrorists, hitmen, spies, or informants, delinquents perform another service. They serve as objects of knowledge. Foucault writes, "in fabricating delinquency, it [disciplinary power] gave to criminal justice a unitary field of objects, authenticated by the 'sciences,' and thus enabled it to function on a general horizon of 'truth'" (DP 256). In other words, certain knowledges themselves, namely the human sciences, have a direct interest in the fabrication and continued existence of their object of study, the delinquent individual.

Delinquents are so very useful, it would seem, that if they did not already exist, society would have had to invent them. Indeed, that is just Foucault's point. Foucault's target for destabilization in *Discipline and Punish*, however, is not just our carceral system. The trap is set for much bigger prey.

Enter the will to truth. If Foucault is right, we may say in outrage, then a terrible thing has occurred: people have been victimized by disciplinary powers that have created false identities for them. Whatever their "real" truth, young men and women have been prodded, pressed, and brainwashed into behaving like criminals and even into believing that criminality formed the core of their very souls. Delinquency does not exist, but for a century and a half we have all been made to believe that it does and to act accordingly, with disastrous results. Something must be done.

Let us consider this outrage and the assumptions that underlie and drive it. The first important assumption is that fundamentally humanity occurs as individuals, each with his or her own true core identity that is untouched by power except a posteriori and negatively. The second important assumption, which is interrelated with the first, is that power is antithetical to truth; this leads to the conclusion that we must be suspicious of any claim to truth if it is clear that the claim is in the interest of some power.

As bearers of a classical liberal legacy, we are predisposed to assume that whatever is traversed by power is also corrupted by it. Power,

we tend to believe, distorts truth. If an event, a thing, or a way of being human cannot be separated from functions of power, then we feel fairly certain that we are not in possession of truth with regard to that event, thing, or person. Therefore, if we become persuaded that delinquency is thoroughly permeated by power, we tend to lose faith in its reality. While reading *Discipline and Punish*, then, we may begin to suspect that the truth of the individuals treated as delinquents has been lost completely beneath a truthless discursive overlay. Delinquents are not *really* delinquents, rather they are victims of oppression.

That view, however, is not likely to appeal to those of us who have known delinquents, attended school with them, worked with them, or have had blood ties with them. At times, some may seem to be victims of a system that casts them into a role in violation of their own natures. But more frequently, delinquents do not seem like victims except perhaps in some very abstract, theoretical sense; they seem, instead, like people who choose to live as they do *just as nondelinquents choose to live as they do*.

And that, given our tendency to see power as a violation of truth, should come as a fairly disturbing thought. For it implies this: either we are all victims of oppressive forces and our truth is hidden from us perhaps irrevocably, or delinquents are real beings, true beings fabricated by power.

The text pursues the latter possibility. The very being of the delinquent is a matter of production, it asserts. Furthermore, delinquency is not the only form of selfhood that may be analyzed as a production of disciplinary regimes. There is also the soldier, the factory worker, the schoolchild, and, the text insinuates, the family member. These beings, these persons, also are produced through disciplinary mechanisms. These ways of being selves are also invested and contoured by networks of power. Delinquency is far from a singular occurrence. In fact, Foucault asserts, “[t]his book is intended as a correlative history of the modern soul . . .” (DP 23). Not just delinquents, but everyone is placed in question here. *Discipline and Punish* is not a discourse about what is external to its readers and author; it is a discourse whose movement encompasses and places in question every one of us.

The first prospect was unsettling enough: that perhaps we are all so traversed—in even the most ordinary, most intimate or characteristic expressions of ourselves—by normalizing disciplinary power that we are all ignorant of our own truth, that all our efforts to know ourselves are illusory failures. But the second prospect, that the “truth” of the individual may in fact just *be* configurations of power, is far more unsettling. For how is the will to truth to appropriate and conform itself to the “truth” that there is no stable, unitary truth of the individual human soul apart from historical, productive power? We would, perhaps, rather place

our hope on the first prospect and assume that we just do not have the real truth about ourselves. As Foucault's text unfolds, however, the second prospect takes on greater and greater plausibility. We are forced, by the power of our own desire for truth, to open our thinking to the possibility that the human individual may itself be a historical event, a product of power relations. We will follow this thought's unfolding through the rest of this chapter.

First of all, we willing self-knowers might ask, how could a disciplinary regime create individuality? Foucault offers a careful and convincing analysis. He suggests three mutually reinforcing modes of production of individuality: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and the technique of the examination.

First we see a shift in architecture. Buildings are to function as machines in which observation may take place, for observation in itself becomes a means of control. Hospitals become machines for controlling contagion, and thus the conduct of those infected. Factories become machines for controlling production by controlling the laborers within them. Schools become machines for controlling the development of children. The form of power that invests these architectural apparatuses is not modeled after the top to bottom power of a sovereign king; power comes to function within these institutions automatically, anonymously, and continuously. "Discipline makes possible the operation of a relational power that sustains itself by its own mechanisms and which, for the spectacle of public events, substitutes the uninterrupted play of calculated gazes" (DP 177). A network of power is formed in which a certain set of spaces are marked out, across which human beings are distributed. One is identified by the space one occupies, and one is kept in that space and brought into conformity with that identity through the subtly physical, though noncorporeal, method of constant ordered observation.

Observation is closely related to normalization. Observation of persons makes possible a ranking system in which persons are compared to one another and to a set of standards. Deviation from the standards or failure to progress upward through the established ranks in the allotted time is grounds for punishment. Once such a system is in place and functioning, however, the sort of punishment it offers is simply its own reassertion. The schoolboy who fails to remember his catechism is punished by being lowered in class rank. The norm or standard that the child must attain spreads itself out both spatially and temporally in terms of gradations, expectations for progress, and physical location so that the child who fails does not violate the normalizing system or escape it, but merely remains within it, demoted, marked by its judgment. The disciplinary technique of normalization not only defines the good, the right, or the proper, but also the bad, the wrong, and the improper all on a long

continuum of gradation from which there is no escape. There is no outside to normalizing networks, and there is no gap in them, only a gapless series of ranks. Within such a network every stage of development, every possible state of being, can be identified.

Finally, “the examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment” (DP 184). Examination is the technique of differentiation; it is the mechanism for distribution of persons across a graded and gapless continuum. “In this space of domination, disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by arranging objects. The examination is, as it were, the ceremony of this objectification” (DP 187). Most significant, it is the examination that first inserts the patient, the schoolchild, the soldier, or the prisoner into a system of writing. Records must be kept of the course of disease, of the progress of training, or of rehabilitation.

Thanks to the whole apparatus of writing that accompanies it, the examination opened up two correlative possibilities: firstly, the constitution of the individual as a describable, analyzable object, not in order to reduce him to “specific” features, as did the naturalists in relation to living things, but in order to maintain him in his individual features, in his particular evolution, in his own aptitudes or abilities, under the gaze of a permanent corpus of knowledge; and, secondly, the constitution of a comparative system that made possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of the gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given “population.” (DP 190)

Thus each human being, thoroughly individualized and maintained in his or her individuality, becomes a “case.” He or she is both an object of knowledge and an identifiable, locatable target for power. The individual “may be described, judged, measured, compared with others” (DP 191). And, at the same time, the individual may “be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.” (DP 191).

Prior to the establishment of disciplinary power, only heroes—kings, generals, or saints—were marked out as individuals whose lives might be documented and who might feel themselves to be unique. Within disciplinary regimes, however, individuality is created and enforced for all persons. Self-identity is produced and persons are fixed by it, unable to transgress it. Within disciplinary systems, each person is observed, examined, judged, and documented in his or her precise degree of deviation from the norm. Thus individuality just is deviance. To be an individual just is to occupy a particular place with regard to a set of norms and to own a history of such particular occupations in a documented order. As

such, individuality can exist only within a network of power relations wherein norms and hierarchies are strictly maintained. The modern individual is a creation of disciplinary techniques.

This point cannot be overstressed because our inclination will be to disregard its significance. Our own will to truth, the will that informs us in our very being, will insist upon its own object, its *raison d'être*: a true self-identical core of being analytically separable from and logically prior to power. Taking Foucault seriously, then, when he suggests that such an a priori self-identical core does not exist, will threaten that will's very existence.

Insofar as we *are* that will to truth, if we find ourselves thinking within the plausibility of Foucault's account of individuality, we will attempt to think the historicity of individuality as the "truth" of the individual. That move will probably occur as follows. First, we will assume that individuals exist self-identically through time. Then we will assume that the ahistorical truth of ourselves as individuals is that we were fabricated *within power mechanisms and are sustained by them*. We will discipline ourselves to that truth, attempt to force ourselves to identify with that truth, to become that truth, to "own" it. The *real* truth of individual selfhood, we will say, is that it cannot be understood separately from power. We will, however, maintain the reality of that truth apart from power and thus we will fail to place in question truth itself, the notion that there are stable identities that can be known apart from any context of valuation, of power.

Such a move, however, will only end in frustration because within Foucault's discourse it will not bring us to stable ground. Once we realize that the movement toward self-identical individuality is itself the move of a disciplinary regime, we must also realize that to insist that the true identity of individuality is its historicity and its location within a power regime is simply to replicate that disciplinary power. *Any* insistence on a stable identity for a human self, whether that stable identity is the identity of the delinquent or the identity of a power-traversed historical subjectivity, is a move undertaken from within disciplinary power and not in violation of it. In other words, this new claim to truth—that the individual is a creation of power—is not innocent of power. On its own terms, it is a self-violating claim.

Thus the text disrupts our move to reinstate the notion of a truth dissociated from power and refuses to allow us to leave unquestioned the notion that power and truth are mutually repulsive. Perhaps, Foucault writes,

we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands

and its interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging 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. (DP 27)

We are not, so this text tells us, going to find a truth of our selves that is free of networks of power. Even the truth that we are not going to find a truth of our selves that is free of networks of power is not free of these networks.

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 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (DP 194)

For centuries we Westerners believed that we must come to know ourselves in our ownmost truth. Only thus can we be saved; only thus can we be mentally healthy; only thus can we battle the powers of oppression that surround us in the gathering darkness. Foucault's discourse places in question our belief that there is a true self, apart from historical power networks, that we can come to know. But worse, his discourse places in question our *drive* to know. Our will to truth, to the truth of ourselves, maintains itself by asserting that there is a truth toward which it strives. In the absence of such a truth, the will to truth—which to a great extent *is* what we are—cannot remain in being.

Within the unfolding of Foucault's discourse, as we have said, the will to truth will attempt to maintain itself by asserting that the truth of self is power. But that assertion cannot maintain its own stability, for what it amounts to is an assertion that the pure core of self-identity simply is impurely self-identical, precisely because it is an a posteriori construction of power.

Furthermore, the drive to identify has already been exposed as a disciplinary drive, not a Galahadesque search for pure self undertaken in purity. To remain what it is, however, to maintain itself in its own identity, the drive to know, the will to truth cannot own itself as power; it cannot own its own creativity, nor can it own its own interestedness. If the "truth" of the will to truth is its affinity with what it has named

untruth, then it is disrupted in its movement, since it is forced, compelled by its own energy, to accept as truth that it has no truth.

This, of course, is a paradox. It amounts to perpetual violation, disruption, and frustration of the drive to know. Foucault's discourse is the labyrinth in which the will to truth is led to turn against itself. It is a movement that folds back upon what moves it. It is the energy of our will to know folding back over upon itself—again and again and again. The text's movement *is* the will to truth turning against, over, and through itself. The text *is* fundamentally self-violating and self-overcoming, not just because it destabilizes the notion of self, but, more important, because it places in question the very power of the text itself. It is the text *qua* text that is undergoing destabilization within the text.

The thesis of this chapter is that self-overcoming is not simply to be looked for, to be located and analyzed, within Foucault's texts, but rather that Foucault's texts may be read *as* self-overcomings, as pure motion, as overcoming-occurring. Foucault's discourse runs counter to power and instigates the overcoming of certain structures of power, for example, the ascetic self; but Foucault's discourse also is power, and its truth is contingent upon and supportive of that power. Thus it is a discourse that bares its neck before its own analytic knife; it is a discourse that embraces its own mortality. In its agitative action it dissolves itself. It is a discourse that, in proper—that is, in perverse—Nietzschean fashion, ends by biting its own tail—simultaneously, of course, swallowing in advance any commentary that would claim to have offered a true account of the self-overcoming movement it manifests.