

Reading Questions: Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*

1. Foucault once suggested that his work aimed to “create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.” In *Discipline and Punish*, he calls this “a genealogy of the modern soul.” (29) (Who else used the term “genealogy” in a related sense?) What does he mean by the “subject” in this context? And how does *Discipline and Punish* tell this sort of story? In other words, this is a book about prisons, but also about something larger.
2. Foucault points us very forcefully to pay attention to what he calls the “history of the body” and the “politics” of how the body is regulated (e.g. 25-27). What are the big differences in how the body of the criminal is treated in the course of the story he tells in this book?
3. “The soul is the prison of the body” (30). Explain what he means by this paradox. (By the way, what worldview thinks of the body as the prison of the soul?)
4. There’s a conventional story about how we’ve made progress in criminal punishment, which evolved from brutal and arbitrary measures to a more humane system--with allowances for holdovers and setbacks (e.g. 16ff). In what way does Foucault want to challenge this view?
5. Foucault uses terms like “technologies” of power and a “micro-physics of power” (26). What is he trying to get us to see by using these terms? Where does discipline take place? How is it organized and carried out?
6. Foucault sometimes used the term “power-knowledge” (e.g. 27-28). What does he see as the relationship between power and knowledge?
7. “The individual is...a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called ‘discipline.’ We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes,’ it ‘represses,’ it ‘censors’...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” (194). Power is both repressive and productive--ponder, and try to explain his point in your own words. Just before that passage, Foucault refers to “mercantile society.” What is his point?
8. “Hierarchical observation,” “normalizing judgment,” “the examination”: are these kinds of disciplinary power limited to prisons (170ff)?
9. What is the panopticon, and whose idea was it (195ff)? Why did Foucault call it “power reduced to its ideal form?”