Foucault’s hypothesis concerning the emergence of abnormality is certainly indebted to the views of his mentor, Georges Canguilhem. The latter said once, quoting Gabriel Tarde, “the normal type is the degree zero of the monstrosity” (Canguilhem, 1992, 160/2008, 136 & 126). Foucault’s analysis reflects Canguilhem’s assertion, namely that, during the nineteenth century a whole system of knowledge (a sort of normative project, ECF-AB, 50) structured around the polemical/political concept of norm (ECF-AB, 50; Canguilhem, 1991, 146) made possible the incorporation of deviant individuals. But more importantly, Foucault claims that the constitution of such a domain of analysis made possible a specific apparatus of intervention and transformation of abnormal individuals which was driven by a new form of power, “the power of normalization” (ECF-AB, 26 & 42).

Three figures - the human monster, the individual to be corrected, and the onanist – “come together in the nineteenth century to give rise to the domain of abnormality” (ECF-AB, 55). Among those three figures, the monster is the most problematic one, “the fundamental figure around which bodies of power and domains of knowledge are disturbed and reorganized” (ECF-AB, 63). What are the bodies of knowledge that constitute this notion?

The monster is a legal notion that appears in the “juridico-biological domain” (ECF-AB, 56). It represents a double violation, “a breach of the law” both at the level of nature and at the level of society. First, the monster does not merely represent a
deformity or a dysfunction of some living organism. Each period, says Foucault, from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, has privileged a form of monster. While for the Middles Ages, the monster was a mixture of two species (the bestial man), for the Renaissance, it was a mixture of two individuals in one body (Siamese twins) and, for the Classical age, a mixture of two sexes (hermaphrodites). Though the monster was seen as a transgression of natural limits (FDE2-1, 659), it carried nonetheless within itself the ambiguity of a “natural form of the unnatural” (ECF-AB, 63&56). Ultimately, as Foucault points out, “there is monstrosity only when confusion [in nature] comes up against, [...] , canon or religious law” (ECF-AB, 63).

How is this possible?

Since the monster is a blurring of the limits, it cannot be classified. The confusion in nature introduces a second confusion into the canonical law. For example, should a monster be baptized? Canonical law cannot solve this problem, and thus the monster is also a juridical enigma. The monster stands outside of the legal framework, it represents a moment of contradiction of the law, a failure of legal classification, and so it leaves the law with nothing to say (ECF-AB, 56). The monster symbolizes the undecidability of the law (ECF-AB, 64). For these reasons, “the monster is the limit, both the point at which law is overturned and the exception that is found only in extreme cases” (ECF-AB, 56). Thus, the human monster is a double transgression since it combines the impossible and the forbidden.

The nineteenth century brings however a new understanding of the monster, and for Foucault, this fundamental shift can be observed in the treatment of two
figures: the cannibal and the incestuous. They were previously the sign of a mixture of species (ECF-AB, 97) or of sexes, and as such, they were subject to the criminal law. However, these forms of monstrosity as mixture, these “forbidden consumptions” (ECF-AB, 98) or “alimentary and sexual prohibitions” (ECF-AB, 102) either slowly disappear (see the case of hermaphrodites; ECF-AB, 72) or crystallize into a new problem in criminal psychology (criminal monstrosity, ECF-AB 111). This change was due to a double shift. First, there was a shift in the type of explanation from pathological anatomy to penal psychiatry (outward vs. inward) and, second, a shift in the economy of power to punish (ECF-AB, 75) from an immeasurable system of punishment intended to reinstate the sovereignty of power, to a new measurable punitive structure where a crime was to be punished “at the level of interest that underpinned it” (ECF-AB, 114). Foucault understands by interest “both a sort of internal rationality of the crime [...] and, at the same time, what makes crime punishable.” (ECF-AB, 114)

Instead of being condemned for the anatomical structure of their body, for their somatic abnormality, hermaphrodites, for example, would be charged for their “perverse sexual tastes” (e.g. the case of Herculine Barbin, FDE2-2, 935). Thus emerges, “the attribution of a monstrosity that is not juridico-natural but juridico-moral; a monstrosity of conduct rather than a monstrosity of nature” (ECF-AB, 73; Davidson, 1991, 57-58). Monstrosity shifts from the domain of nature itself to the domain of conduct, while continuing to be seen as a breach of the legal system, and so, it penetrates every small deviation (ECF-AB, 55) and renders them criminal. In this sense, the monster plays the role of a “magnifying model” since it becomes the
very principle of intelligibility, the form of small deviations and irregularities (ECF-AB, 56).

On the other hand, cases of criminal monstrosity (e.g. the case of Henriette Cornier, ECF-AB, 112) brought to light the fact that motiveless crimes created a blockage in the penal system. The penal system operated on a system of motives (raisons) as a necessary condition for punishment. However, in such cases, the system could no longer judge, and, thus, was obliged “to come to a halt and put questions to psychiatry” (ECF-AB, 117). The application of the law required two superposable systems of reasons. Not only should the motives for committing the criminal action be established (intelligibility of the act), but also the subject’s rational motivation as a sign for its sanity. If the criminal was in a state of dementia, according to the Article 64, no punishment could be applied (ECF-AB, 115).

As a consequence of two simultaneous codifications, psychiatry was institutionalized as a form of “hygiene of the social body” (ECF-AB, 118). First, madness was codified as illness (“as a thing to look at”, EMC, 70), and as an effect of this codification, all sorts of disorders, errors, small failures of conducts were captured within a system of the normal and the pathological. From this, public hygiene emerges as a specific form of medical knowledge. Second, madness, along with all sorts of deviations, was perceived as dangerous. For that reason, psychiatry became not simply a system of knowledge of mental illness, but more importantly “an absolutely necessary form of social precaution” against a certain number of dangers related to psychiatric disorders. So, the monster, the one present in the smallest deviations of conduct, comes to permeate the social body. At the same time,
it is detected and codified as a social danger (ECF-AB, 119-120) that has to be normalized.

Certainly, if “monstrosity is systematically suspected to be behind all criminality,” a new economy of power (procedures, analyses) is required. Its task is to “enable the effects of power to be increased, the cost of its exercise to be reduced, and its exercise integrated into the mechanism of production” (ECF-AB, 87). As a condition for this power of normalization “to be exercised without gaps and [to] penetrate the social body in its totality”, an entire medical process inscribes the slightest irregularity into a system of correction and control of crimes.

For Foucault, the modern monster would take two main forms: the political monster, the criminal who breaks the social contract, who “prefers his own interest to the laws governing the society” (ECF-AB, 92), and who reverts to a state of nature; and the juridical monster, who abuses his own power, for example, a despot, a king, or a prince. These two figures are the two forms of the monster, “the monster from below” and “the monster from above” (ECF-AB, 101). In their very twinship, these two figures will haunt the problematic of abnormal individuality” (ECF-AB, 101).

In short, the category of monster plays a key role in Foucault’s genealogy of normality and abnormality. Foucault does not simply show how this category has evolved from a juridico-natural to a juridico-moral concept, but more significantly, how this notion, along with the application of a certain norm of conduct, has permeated all behavior to such an extent that all individuals, in some degree, are deviants. We are all monsters; hence, des anormaux.
Bibliography


Suggested Readings


