

## **POWER GOES TO SCHOOL: TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND DISCIPLINE**

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For at least two decades discipline has been at or near the top of the list of public concerns about our schools.<sup>1</sup> Nor should this surprise us; developing the mix of foresight, judgement, and self-control that enables (or perhaps just constitutes) “discipline” is an important task of childhood. As long as schools are places where part of a child’s education takes place, helping children develop discipline will be one of the “problems” — that is, legitimate tasks — that schools face. However, when used in school-talk, “discipline” often is translated into terms of control and power, not development or education. “Discipline” is often, perhaps usually, synonymous with “classroom management.”

This sense of discipline-as-control will not seem strange to anyone who has read Michel Foucault, especially his *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>2</sup> On his view, when we begin talking of “the problem of discipline,” we are really asking about the power relationships<sup>3</sup> that exist within schools. Specifically, we should be asking what form of power<sup>4</sup> we face, for power is multi-faceted. Foucault analyzes two forms of power in detail: sovereign and disciplinary. So let us examine each in turn.

### FORMS OF POWER

As Foucault describes in the first part of *Discipline and Punish*, sovereign power is that form expressed in recognizable ways through particular and identifiable individuals. The “nodes” of this form of power are the king, the prince, and the agents thereof. These individuals are visible agents of power, known by others and by themselves to be such. Sovereign power is also typified by the intermittency with which it is exercised. It assesses taxes, enforces the law by exacting penalties for violations thereof, raises armies in time of war, and so on. But each of these cases where sovereign power flexes is discrete; it acts in response to a certain set of circumstances and through a specific and identifiable agent or set of agents. When sovereign power operates, we know that we have been acted upon, in what ways, and by whom. The complement to this is the understanding that most of one’s life is beyond the control of the sovereign.

It is more difficult to ascertain the precise nature of disciplinary power since one of its distinguishing features is the swiftness and lightness with which it acts, thus rendering it substantially less visible than sovereign power. Briefly, we can state three differences: (1) sovereign power operates through specific visible agents; disciplinary power is diffuse in its operation, coming from everywhere and acting on everyone; (2) because of its visibility, sovereign power is susceptible to resistance, while disciplinary power, invisible and all-pervasive, is difficult to locate, and therefore difficult to resist; and (3) while sovereign power affects only a small portion of an individual’s life, disciplinary power affects virtually all aspects of living, subjecting everyone to the possibility of surveillance at all times.

First of all, the disciplinary society controls not through the direct application of power by the sovereign or his agent, but through an impersonal and invisible gaze. The efficiency of disciplinary power is closely related to its invisibility compared with the visible sovereign. For disciplinary power to be effective, it is the subject, not the power, which must be seen. This relationship of visibility and invisibility is reciprocal; for the subject to be disciplined, it must be visible, at least potentially, to the disciplinary gaze, and know itself to be; at the same time, the gaze must actually

be invisible so that it is effective even when it is not actually turned on an individual. Its totalizing power lies precisely in its universal potentiality, combined with the impossibility of verifiability.

The second advantage gained when the dominant form of power shifted from sovereign to disciplinary results from the key elements of its effectiveness: lightness, speed, and subtlety, which result in invisibility.<sup>5</sup> This invisibility of disciplinary power makes resistance and/or revolt against it substantially less likely and more difficult than was the case with sovereign power. This is simply because there is no single or visible locus of disciplinary power against which to direct one's resistance; disciplinary power is simply everywhere.<sup>6</sup> In one sense, this might seem to make resistance easier — there are so many opportunities to resist. But power that is everywhere is in a very real sense nowhere, and, more to the point, becomes equivalent to a force of nature, which is the appearance disciplinary power assumes once it installs itself in the relations with which we negotiate the world.

We are shaped through the coercion of disciplinary power, but unaware of the shaping. This is the importance of its lightness and its speed; we are deprived of the opportunity for resistance, and once effectively shaped, we have no desire to revolt. To the extent that disciplinary power operates according to its potential, we can never verify that we have been disciplined, and we are always being disciplined. However, this level of efficiency is never realized; we live in a disciplinary society, not a disciplined one. Resistance is possible. The operation of disciplinary power is observable, once one knows what to look for.

However, even when the subjects become aware that they are being disciplined, there is no single clear target for resistance. In the days of sovereign power, the people could see the source of the power and the forces acting on them quite clearly: the king's laws, the king's justice, the king's courts, and the king's ministers. When the yoke fell on them too heavily, or with obvious injustice, the people knew where to direct their resentment and resistance. Contrast this set of circumstances with the operation of disciplinary power, which is not only more efficient in its operation but is virtually impervious to the sort of resistance which could be organized against the sovereign. Its invisibility and non-locatability keep the people from perceiving its effects.

This brings us to a third advantage of disciplinary power over sovereign power: its constant operation. Power is only effective in when it acts; sovereign power only acts at particular moments. The opposite is true for disciplinary power; because it operates continually its effects are theoretically limitless. The control over the individual exercised by disciplinary power is thus not only more effective, it is also more totalizing, in the sense that it is more fine-grained in its effects.

Disciplinary power creates and informs the human sciences which do the work of defining our human "normality" by "play[ing] an important part in the creation of disciplined subjects, that is, individuals who conformed to certain standards of sanity, health, docility, competence, and so on."<sup>7</sup> But this sense of normality, it is critical to note, is not to be found in the "nature" of humans or in the social world, neither of which exists except as constituted by power relations.

"Normal" is nothing more — but it is also nothing less — than the social forms of life within the dominant discourses that power creates. But to have meaning, normalization requires something more than this: "normal" must be measured and defined in order to exert an influence on individuals. This is the role of the examination in the disciplinary society.<sup>8</sup> The examination is the disciplinary technology that allows for a clear and precise measurement of those attributes which power deems important enough to order and manage. Further, the technique of examination allows reduction of data to a form that can be computed and averaged, and it is through this process that normality is defined and that the power of normalization is deployed. In this sense, we can see schools and their examinations to be paradigms of disciplinary institutions.<sup>9</sup>

And this process of normalization then serves the ordering function of power, as it helps create individuals of a certain type. Using the “normal” as a goal and an ideal, disciplinary power acts in the world to normalize those selves subject to it. This process of normalization defines for us the way we are supposed to be. And the invisibility and lightness of the operation of this form of power leads the subjects to confuse the “normal” with the “natural.” That is, the defined and desired “normality” is not seen as a product of power’s operation; it is seen as a “true” measurement of the way the world “is.”

Further, this ordering and normalization allows for individuals to be placed usefully within the social machine that the disciplines are used to create. Rather than constituting a confusion or a chaos, as the multiplicities of individuality potentially could do, the process of individualization with respect to a norm allows those individualities to be used and assigned in an efficient and effective manner in the service and production of an orderly disciplinary society.

The disciplinary society seeks, by its totalizing nature, to direct and control all aspects of the lives of all the subject-selves it constitutes. Only thus can all energy be devoted to productive pursuits; only thus can all subjects be properly constituted and supervised. It is a matter of efficiency: undisciplined expenditure of energy is not productive, and it is only through constant surveillance that such wastefulness can be prevented. “Discipline is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it, but of *composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine.*”<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of discipline in the modern age, and this is a change from earlier ages, is efficiency obtained through ordering, identifying, controlling, and directing the multiplicities constitutive of modernity. The social direction and structure that used to be provided through the agency of a sovereign now depend on the efficiency of organization of the social matrices through and on which power will operate. Discipline is an organizational and productive force, “composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine.” It acts in the world by bringing together (composing) the materials (including time and individuals) in such a way that the world is changed — productivity ensues. More radically, among the things that are produced are a certain type of productive time and a certain type of productive individual: “Instead of being locked away, hidden, the body was made visible and carefully scrutinized; instead of being tortured, it was programmed and exercised; instead of its simply being placed in servitude, its activities were reconstituted for efficiency and productivity.”<sup>11</sup>

## TEACHERS AND POWER

Where are teachers located with respect to these forms of power? It is, according to Foucault, a tautology to say that teachers are situated in the web of disciplinary power; as members of a disciplinary society, that goes without saying. However, it is significant to note that the power that they consciously exercise is sovereign, not disciplinary, in form; the power they wield is more susceptible to effective resistance than the power to which they are subject.

As are we all, teachers are subject to the subtle, nearly invisible workings of power. McNeil shows us how teachers are affected in ways that are extremely difficult to observe.<sup>12</sup> The teachers she presents to us are bright, intelligent professionals with a great deal of expertise in their areas. McNeil’s question when she began her project was why course content so often is shallow, simplistic, and disconnected from authentic scholarship. The common hypothesis is that teachers are the least intellectually sophisticated of the professionals (if they are professionals at all). Since they have relatively low GRE scores and GPA’s as undergraduates, it is often suggested that teachers do not know the fields they are supposed to be teaching.<sup>13</sup> The low level of course content is often attributed to the weak academic preparation the teachers themselves bring to their classes; the courses tend to be shallow, simplistic, and disconnected from authentic scholarship because no one can teach what they do not know.

McNeil presents a very different picture of teachers as competent, interested, and interesting professionals with a clear understanding of the complexities of their academic fields and a clear understanding also that their courses lack depth and complexity. Her explanation of the sort of shallow disconnected teaching students see in the classroom seems entirely consistent with Foucault's view of power: the institutional arrangements, in ways no one quite seems able to pin down, makes even the most able and intellectual of the teachers she observes generally tone down their teaching to the level of the approved curriculum materials. Many teachers have personal interest in real political, economic, and social issues which they leave at the schoolroom door. Seeing their job as controlling their students, they seek to do this through control of the curriculum.

McNeil suggests that there is a conflict between reforms that focus on "controlling functions" and those with "educational purposes."<sup>14</sup> The first of these are those reforms which focus on assessment, evaluation, and, more specifically, curriculum as the means to educational improvement. These contrast with reforms which aim at more independence at the classroom level, where teachers are given the freedom to match their instruction to their children. What she is pointing to is the fact that in many respects the efforts to control teachers and manage education serves instead to deaden instruction. By implication, the best hope we have to reach true excellence is to let go, to quit trying so hard to control. If we redirect the energy that we expend on these efforts to gain control, it might be applied to educational purposes instead of management ones.

Many reformers seem to feel that the only way to ensure that good education is going on in individual schools and classrooms is through good administration; supervision and accountability are the routes to good education.<sup>15</sup> What McNeil's analysis suggests stands in opposition to this "common sense" point of view: good teaching can be chaotic and uncontrollable, and so the movement to control education directs us inevitably to bland mediocrity. The "contradiction" is that efforts at control result in just the sort of defensive teaching that sticks as closely as possible to the defined curriculum and prepares students for the expected tests, which is what the reformers began by trying to change; the intellectual life is sucked out of the classroom. As she puts it, "In those schools where the tension between the controlling functions and the educational purposes were resolved in favor of controls, teachers felt undermined, professionally threatened, and, in my analysis, they began unwittingly to participate in their own de-skilling."<sup>16</sup> The harder we try to ensure excellence, the less likely we are to attain it.<sup>17</sup>

In seeking to understand why McNeil's bright and interesting social studies teachers teach such a bland, watered-down form of history — what she calls "consensus history" — the key, from a Foucaultian point of view, is to note that the teachers "began unwittingly to participate in their own de-skilling":

The classroom observations made clear that the school was functioning in a way that attempted to socialize students into consensus history, into passive learner roles. *Yet there was no overt community pressures, no external elites insisting that the school take on this social control function.* The controlling function stemmed from the way the school as an organization worked, not from outside pressures.<sup>18</sup>

While these teachers were aware that they were making decisions to dilute their material intellectually, the forces that led them to that decision were invisible, embedded as they were so deeply and pervasively in the very structure of the school in which they work, forces which themselves are embedded in the broader society.

In serving the social control function, the teachers, themselves both transmitting and being acted on by power, become part of the process by which the young are disciplined, and they themselves are controlled by the same forces. The social control McNeil points to is two-edged; the students are controlled by the teachers, but both teachers and students are controlled and shaped in ways much more subtle and difficult to detect.

This is the working of power in its disciplinary form. Conformity is not the result of overt force that visibly bends the will of those subject to its operation; conformity results from the constant working of invisible constraints that bring us all toward the same “normal” range of practices and beliefs.

But the position of teachers vis-a-vis power is more complex than that. While Foucault uses schools as one of the paradigmatic disciplinary institutions, he ignores the extent to which they are also among the last strongholds of sovereign power. From one perspective teachers are themselves subject to the web of disciplinary power; it is nonetheless true that the teacher, as seen by the student, wields power in its sovereign form. A tenth-grade social studies teacher, no less than the Sheriff of Nottingham, is a visible and identifiable representative of power. As such, and from the students’ point of view, teachers exercise power intermittently, over specific parts of the students’ lives, and from positions of great visibility. As Willis describes in *Learning to Labor*,<sup>19</sup> and as Foucault would predict, the school becomes a site of resistance and outright rebellion precisely because it is a site of sovereign power. As the teachers act to impose control overtly on the students, the students can see that they are being forced to act in ways they would rather not. It therefore seems logical for the students to resist and/or rebel, and they act logically.

The complexity of this interaction of forms of power is suggested by the fact that the very resistance of the youths Willis studies serves to fit them into the niches that the disciplinary society has prepared for the children of the working class. The paradox is that their very resistance to the sovereign power wielded by their teachers places them (and their teachers) ever more firmly in the grip of the disciplinary power that neither students nor teachers stop to perceive, as busy as they are fulfilling their roles within the paradigms of sovereignty. Resisting (and exercising) the sovereignty that belongs to the teacher blinds all even more surely to the disciplinary power that operates on all concerned. It is the sleight of hand by which disciplinary power diverts attention from its exercise.

There are, we should note, serious deficiencies in Foucault’s notion that everything reduces to power. His work at times becomes almost theological in tone; his faith that everything is reducible, finally, to power obscures the ordinary and valuable distinction between power and authority;<sup>20</sup> his view that discipline is imposed on us as an effect of power makes us blind to Dewey’s sense of discipline as a relationship between us and the world as we pursue our aims;<sup>21</sup> and there seems no space for us to consider Noddings’s interesting notions about having a worthwhile ethical ideal to which we aspire.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, a Foucauldian analysis does serve to point to the extent to which we underestimate the complexity of “the discipline problem” in schools, and the inadequacy of the pre-packaged programs sold to practitioners as remedies.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley M. Elam, Lowell C. Rose, and Alec M. Gallup, “The 24th Annual Gallup. Phi Delta Kappa Poll of the Public’s Attitude Toward the Public Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 74 (September 1992): 41-53.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), 209.

<sup>3</sup> This formulation — “power relationships” — may be a redundancy; Foucault’s point is that all relationships are power relationships. Power exists and is manifested (or comes into being) in all relationships.

<sup>4</sup> When Foucault talks about “forms” of power, he is referring to different modes of operation.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 209.

<sup>6</sup> John O’Neill, “The Disciplinary Society: From Weber to Foucault,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 37 (1986): 42-60.

<sup>7</sup> Davis Jones, “The Genealogy of the Urban Schoolteacher,” in *Foucault and Education: Discipline and Knowledge*, ed. Steven J. Ball (New York: Routledge, 1990), 57-77.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 184-92.

<sup>9</sup> The other paradigmatic institutions include hospitals, asylums, and, most clearly, prisons.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 164.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Rouse, *Knowledge and Power: Toward a Political Philosophy of Science* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 213.

<sup>12</sup> Linda M. McNeil, *Contradictions of Control: School Structure and School Knowledge* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> This is clearly the interpretation that drives one whole family of educational reform initiatives, most notably those of the Holmes Group.

<sup>14</sup> McNeil, *Contradictions of Control*, 9, xxi.

<sup>15</sup> That is clearly the assumption that underlies the calls for national testing. Compare this to Foucault's description of disciplinary power's action through surveillance and examination.

<sup>16</sup> McNeil, *Contradictions of Control*, xxi.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas F. Green, *Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1980). One of Green's points is that education policy tends to be set in such a way that it works to avoid failure, not attain excellence.

<sup>18</sup> McNeil, *Contradictions of Control*, xx.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

<sup>20</sup> See especially Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings: 1972-1977*, trans. Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 90-91.

<sup>21</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1984).

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