

**How to Read**

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# **Foucault's**

## **Discipline and Punish**

**Anne Schwan and  
Stephen Shapiro**

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**Foucault's *Discipline and Punish***

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# How to Read Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*

Anne Schwan and Stephen Shapiro



**PlutoPress**  
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First published 2011 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

Distributed in the United States of America exclusively by  
Palgrave Macmillan, a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 2981 9 Hardback  
ISBN 978 0 7453 2980 2 Paperback

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data applied for

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made  
from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping  
and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the  
environmental standards of the country of origin.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed and produced for Pluto Press by Chase Publishing Services Ltd  
Typeset from disk by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England  
Simultaneously printed digitally by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, UK  
and Edwards Bros in the United States of America

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# Rationale

Another book on Foucault? Michel Foucault (1926–1984) is one of the most internationally influential French scholars of the post-World War II period. Known primarily for his work on the mutually enabling relationship between knowledge and power and their use for social control, Foucault has been so influential in the English-speaking humanities and social sciences that it is barely possible to consider yourself a serious student in these fields without a working understanding of his writing, concepts and terminology. Whether contemporary writers strongly agree or disagree with Foucault, or fall somewhere in between, nearly all respond to his widespread influence, even if many are, at times, themselves unaware of their dependence on it. Consequently, the number of books and articles that try to explain, use or extend Foucault is very long indeed. Why then, is there any need, at this late date, for a reader's guide to Foucault and one of his most-cited works, *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison* (1975, English translation 1977)?

The *How to Read Theory* series has as its overall motive to fill a gap for new readers of theoretical classics who have been disserved over recent years. As 'theory' has become more commonly used in the humanities and social sciences, students have been increasingly taught these writings through selected key passages of larger works, usually in specially designed anthologies. This strategy, however, denies those new to theory the chance to *read* critical



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arguments in their full context. Anthology readers lose the chance to see the process by which an argument is built up or how they might even respond to somewhat prefabricated snippets. If those hostile to the presence of theory often complain that many writers use certain theoretical words and phrases as if they were magic incantations that could simply be sprinkled, with mesmeric spirit, over an essay as if they were self-evident truths, the anthology approach is partially to blame, no matter how well-intentioned its editors.

*How to Read Theory*, on the other hand, believes that unfamiliar readers are best educated when they are helped to understand the whole trajectory of an important work by exploring its overall careful construction. Without this complete horizon, readers risk isolating bits of an argument and then misunderstanding what a much-studied writer is trying to say.

Nowhere is this error of incompleteness more common than with Foucault in general and in particular, *Discipline and Punish*, one of his most significant works. Precisely because *Discipline and Punish* has been so cited, a great deal of writing on it is unhelpful, since English-speaking readers, who have frequently relied on secondary explanations and anthologies, do not realize the limits and errors these create. We feel that readers who want to benefit fully from Foucault's insights need to go back and read *Discipline and Punish* as a whole, paying attention to its actual claims and structure of argument, rather than the imaginary ones claimed for it. In particular, existing summaries of *Discipline and Punish* have been especially marred by three key absences, which we hope here to repair.

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The first of these gaps is that abbreviated versions of *Discipline and Punish* lose sight that *Discipline and Punish* is above all a work of history emerging out of a particular French intellectual context. The book examines the strategy and tactics in punishment's changing forms from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth (and beyond). Yet when Foucault published his work, there was still a large difference, if not mutual hostility, between the kinds of historical writing that were dominant in English-speaking lands and the ones by French scholars, who were challenging the themes and methods that Anglophone historians favoured. One feature of this split was the French scholars' move away from defining history by great (usually) men and towards the study of a social history of anonymous or non-heroic figures, those often overlooked from academic perspectives, namely the working class and the poor, women, rural labourers, 'deviants' and criminals (these being overlapping categories). Another feature of the French historians was a declining commitment to relying on specific monumental dates, like those of battles, and towards longer periods of time, by taking several decades, or even centuries, as a single unit or by choosing dates that are not immediately dependent on the actions of a small group of elite historical figures. Even when Anglophone left and labour historians did begin to produce histories of the disempowered, they still tended to highlight 'events' rather than longer time-spans.

Because Foucault's work falls generally within these French interests, his work was largely introduced into the United States and the United Kingdom by literature, rather than history, professors. While the former were more accepting of Foucault's concerns, they were, conversely,

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often less interested in the historical phases that Foucault described and what helped create these changes. They focused instead mainly on the most recent historical phase that might be useful as a way to interpret modern literary and cultural affairs. By ignoring the several shifts between periods of time that Foucault describes, literary and cultural studies scholars lost sense of his claim about how modes of punishment carry meaning only in context of their own moment's dominant features and tensions. Yet if we are not attentive to Foucault's descriptions of ways in which Western societies developed into their modern forms, then we lose sight of both the present as a moment in an ongoing process and Foucault's, admittedly often implicit, suggestions for how we might move beyond or escape this present. Furthermore, if readers only examine parts of *Discipline and Punish*, then they can easily experience Foucault's vision as grim and lacking in change. Nothing could be further from the book's message. Yet to uncover Foucault's dedication to the possibility of a post-disciplinary society, we must pay close attention to his tale of passages through different historical moments to see what Foucault highlights as integral to the making of social change.

In one sense, *Discipline and Punish* appears easy to read. Large parts of the book are written with great style and draw on graphic, immediately understandable examples. Furthermore, the book is organized into parts and sections that make it easy to outline, especially as Foucault often numbers the points he wants to make. Additionally, Foucault is usually very careful to use his terminology in a precise and consistent fashion to differentiate the concepts he wants to illustrate. In another sense, though, Foucault can be an elusive writer to comprehend. This difficulty

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arises because Foucault was very much a member of the post-war French intellectual milieu. In the hothouse of universities located in and around Paris, academics were usually quite familiar with each other's positions within a set of well-known theoretical debates. Because of this (at times suffocating) proximity, they were able to develop a writing style that signalled their own position with a few casual words.

For readers who are less familiar with this French academic environment and its questions, it is very easy to overlook what might seem to be a marginal comment, but is, in fact, the key to decoding a particular passage. For instance, while many would expect that any social history of France throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would draw heavily on the Revolution's effects in the 1790s, Foucault, for reasons partly explained below, rarely draws his readers' attention to it. This is partly because Foucault assumes that his reader is French and therefore very familiar with their own political history, especially the period surrounding the French Revolution and modern nationhood. Many contemporary English-language readers of Foucault are simply not as well versed with these events and their representative figures. When this absence is combined with Foucault's light touch allusions to other academic arguments, large and important aspects of *Discipline and Punish* seem vague, marginal and skippable. Conversely, one reason why the segment on English political scientist Jeremy Bentham's plan for a new model prison, the Panopticon, is so commonly anthologized may be that it is a section that unusually deals with English-language material from an author whose name is already recognizable and has accompanying illustrations that make Foucault's point very

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clear. Yet the Panopticon section might arguably have been removed entirely from the book, since this segment mainly repeats points that Foucault has already made previously in the text. However, because English readers do not follow the historical tale that Foucault constructs or know the story of the French Revolution, they tend to lean on the Panopticon section in ways that create idiosyncratic explanations based on a limited perspective of *Discipline and Punish*.

Foucault might not have spoken more explicitly about the Revolution for reasons involving the second absence in most Anglophone discussions: Foucault's relationship with Marx. For most of the twentieth century, marxism was one of the main intellectual currents for European writers. Whether authors considered themselves on the right or the left, nearly every one wrote with an awareness of Marx's writing on political economy. Additionally, the Communist Party was a mass political party in post-war France and Italy. For English-speakers, the ubiquity of academic conversation about Marx and the wide-spread influence of the Stalinist-oriented French Communist Party (PCF) for much of the twentieth century's intellectual affairs is hard to grasp, given the historically marginal place the Communist Party has had in the UK and the US, as well as the fashion in recent decades to be anti-marxist. Writing after the 1960s, when the French Communist Party was condemned for being a retarding force on worker and student resistance, Foucault (himself briefly a Communist party member in the 1950s) often strives to distance himself from the PCF's official party line and associated theoretical concepts. By rarely mentioning the French Revolution, which had become a litmus test regarding one's allegiance to PCF dictates, Foucault indicates his desire to put distance between the

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party and himself. Since the French Revolution was read by the official left as allegorically foreshadowing the Russian one in 1918, and, in turn, the Cold War conflict between Western state-officiated capitalism and Eastern state-officiated sovietism, any mention of the 1790s was fraught. So if Foucault does not devote much time to the Revolution, it is because he wishes to avoid being seen as embroiled within the skirmishes surrounding party affiliation. And, as we will see, Foucault believes that state party politics obscure the ways in which modern power relations and class stratification operate.

Yet to move away from the official communist party is not the same as rejecting Marx's writings and insights. Marx is one of the most favourably cited authorities in *Discipline and Punish*, and Foucault implicitly and explicitly draws on Marx's arguments in *Capital* to help explain the logic for historical change. Foucault always introduces Marx as supporting evidence and never as a figure to be disproved. As Foucault makes clear (221), capitalism could not exist without the form of control that Foucault calls 'discipline' and discipline could not succeed without the rise of capitalism. In many ways, one of *Discipline and Punish's* main projects in its treatment of class-struggle, power and knowledge is to provide a way for new students of Marx to escape the PCF's increasingly unfruitful use of the terms 'ideology' and 'false consciousness' as explanations for why the working class submits to middle-class authority.

Still, because so many Anglophone critics who used theory from the 1970s onward either explicitly positioned themselves as anti-marxist or were, more commonly, simply unfamiliar with Marx's work, they promoted readings of Foucault that denied or downplayed Foucault's agreements

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with Marx. Similarly, many unashamed marxists mistook the assertions of Foucault's acolytes for Foucault's own arguments, and they, too, (wrongly) insist that Foucault is unsympathetic to materialist claims. We feel that any basic reading of *Discipline and Punish* makes it impossible to claim any of the above. Therefore, our second justification for this book is the need to scrape away the crust of prejudice that has accumulated around *Discipline and Punish* in order to see afresh what it is actually arguing. As Foucault repeatedly asks us to do, we need to restore our reading of *Discipline and Punish* alongside Marx's critique of capitalism.

At its heart, *Discipline and Punish* is a stunning dismantling of the cherished bourgeois ideal of the individual and the political, economic and cultural valences of that concept. Liberal politics enshrines the rights of the individual at the heart of most of its constitutional and legal theories and actively seeks to make collective groupings, like class or ethnicity, invisible and unremarkable. The liberal notion of intrinsic basic freedoms depends on the assumption that it is the individual's speech and beliefs that must be protected against society. The individual also lies at the heart of liberal economic theory, which highlights the moment of the contract, the buying and selling between two consenting parties, as the most fair and equal way of conducting business exchanges. Culturally, the private individual is celebrated as the hallmark of Enlightenment rationality, humanist sensibility, the Romantic cult of artistic genius and the container of authentic, emotional and behavioural identities.

Along with a longstanding leftist and marxist tradition, Foucault uses *Discipline and Punish* to argue that the

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cultivation of the individual in these terms camouflages the middle class's desire to become the dominant group within a capitalist economy. The scene of the contract obscures actual power inequalities, Enlightenment reason is linked to coercive force and the humanist mythos of the authentic personality of the individual has been historically constructed as a device to control threatening collectives, namely those of the working and lower classes. Yet as Foucault casts suspicion on the humanist rhetoric of individual freedom, he challenges basic mainstream assumptions about using personal identity as a tool for liberation.

Here we find a third absence in many readings of Foucault. Because Foucault focuses on dominant social structures, it is easy to believe that he presents a totalizing vision, a picture of a closed box with no way out. This pessimistic reading can only come about from de-historicized and de-contextualized readings of Foucault's work. Foucault, however, repeatedly argues that each historical phase can and does decline, usually from its inability to control popular resistance from the lower and labouring classes. If discipline remains effective today, this is only because it has not fully been challenged, and it remains so effective as it works in ways almost unseen in our daily lives. Yet Foucault's ultimate motivation is to clarify how discipline operates so that it *can* be challenged. He is more forthright about this process, however, in his interviews, rather than in *Discipline and Punish* itself.

Nowhere does Foucault present a monolithic version of society or suggest that left political activism is pointless. Foucault wrote *Discipline and Punish* alongside his own membership in *GIP* (*Le Groupe d'Information sur les*



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*Prisons*/Group for Information on Prisons), which sought to provide a public medium for French prisoners' complaints at a time when prisoners' riots for rights were making the news. Elsewhere in his writing, Foucault talks about the need for academic researchers to recover the voices of the historically disempowered to help better contemporary conditions. *Discipline and Punish* belongs to this vision. When Foucault says that he is writing 'the history of the present' (31), he invites his contemporary readers to *use* the lessons of his history, not simply learn them by heart.

These three elements of (revolutionary) history, marxism and activism are often muted in accounts of Foucault, yet without them, no intelligible or satisfying reading of *Discipline and Punish* can emerge. Our goal here is to be 'new' only by maintaining fidelity to Foucault's actual text.

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## Overview

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault presents a history of the changes in criminal codes and punishments to explore why Western society moved from a bodily punishment of torture to a 'gentle' punishment of prison sentences. He argues that we did not stop torturing people because we became more enlightened, humanitarian and respectful of individual rights. Instead, he claims that the codes of 'justice' always represent and materially enact social power. The difference between early modern society and a modern one is not that modern society is more civilized; it is just that punishment before the late eighteenth century had a logic that expressed the dominant interests of society wherein the King was meant to have absolute power. Punishment in modern society is enacted differently because modern society is bourgeois; it is controlled by the middle class, and the middle class has different social agendas than the monarchy.

Foucault focuses on a history of punishment, therefore, to illustrate the larger social transfer and transformation of power from the aristocracy to the middle classes. By learning the changes in the mode of punishment over time, we can see how since the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century, the bourgeoisie have maintained authority by creating modern forms of subjectivity through a dual process: making an individual a non-threatening, subordinated political 'subject' while simultaneously installing a new kind of personhood or identity. This form of power mainly

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works by producing *knowledge*, a defining 'truth' about individuals' behaviour and personality, only in order to *discipline* them through *social definitions of normality*, *material institutions* (like schools, hospitals and prison reformatories) and the supervising judgment of *professionals* (doctors, teachers, judges, etc.). The story Foucault tells is the move from excessive public, physical punishments to private, invisible discipline of our psychological sense of selfhood, as a middle-class tactic to control forms of popular (mass) socialization and alternative political and economic outlooks.

By challenging the notion that the 'self' is a space of human freedom and guarantee of rights, Foucault seeks to dismantle cherished notions about political and economic liberalism, which highlight individual choice and liberty; the Enlightenment, as a movement that believes that knowledge can be objective and detached from power relations, if not actively in opposition to social inequality; and all forms of psychological claims that believe we have an authentic interior personality that is an aesthetic sanctuary from the public realm of politics and the marketplace.

*Discipline and Punish*, then, uses penal history to incriminate a host of Enlightenment and Romantic-era claims about society and the self. Rather than seeing the personal as a tool of liberation, Foucault sees it as a trap that has been set in advance for us by middle-class interests. As such, Foucault seems to be offering a critique from within the left about the ways in which the cultural politics of the 1960s onward have been organized along the lines of (ethnic, racial, sexual, gender, environmental, etc.) identity politics and claims for self-expression. In critiquing the self's desires as socially conditioned and contaminated by

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social divisions and economic inequality, Foucault also offers a line of critical enquiry on all forms of humanities and social science scholarship that often take these new kinds of identities as their focus. This approach became especially evident in literary studies, where the idea of individual genius and the heroic reader's private pleasure had been a dominant theme for some time, a move that Foucault specifically mentions in *Discipline and Punish*. What if novels, for instance, are themselves mediums for transmitting unfair power relations as they help audiences to fashion their imagination about the self?

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault reveals knowledge, power and subjectivity as a scheme that often operates below our radar, since its procedures usually seem trivial and not worth protesting. In *How to Read Foucault's Discipline and Punish*, we seek to enable the reader's efforts in their first encounter with this challenging and exciting book. To help orient you, we follow *Discipline and Punish's* chapter and section structure and often quote Foucault's own words so that they will seem less strange or incomprehensible when you next read them. We try to be comprehensive in our account, but no guide can ever be complete. Foucault is too complex a thinker and the riches of *Discipline and Punish* can only be found through multiple readings. Ideally this book will help provide the platform for these future encounters, assisting you with the first steps by pointing out the book's general architecture and significance of its passages. With this awareness, you should be more comfortable and confident in reading (and using) *Discipline and Punish* and Foucault's other writings as well. In short, this guide should be a starting point, not a conclusion.

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## Note on Text

Foucault originally published *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison* in 1975 with Éditions Gallimard. The first and only English translation, by Alan Sheridan, appeared in 1977 with Allen Lane. While this translation has since appeared under different imprints (UK readers will usually find it as a Penguin, while it is Vintage for US ones), the plates and pagination remain the same for all. Any Anglophone reader can thus easily locate the pages indicated in our parenthetical references.

There are two main formal differences between the French original and the English translation. More illustrative plates are included in the former, mostly of different images of prisons. Also, Sheridan turned some of the non-descriptive footnote citations into embedded parenthetical references. We believe that Sheridan's change makes for a more fluid reading experience. In his translator's note, Sheridan comments on the work's title, which literally would be *To Survey and Punish*. After Foucault, we might find the word 'surveillance' easier to understand and more rich in implications, but in the 1970s, Sheridan found it 'too restricted and technical'. He claims that Foucault himself suggested the English title as the best compromise. Lastly, when Foucault talks about abstract individuals, he only uses the masculine pronoun. Contemporary readers may see this as either simply a convention of Foucault's time or

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a dogged inability to recognize the implication of gender. In any case, we will below typically use 'he or she' and so on.

In memory of Sally Ledger (1961–2009), Melvin Shapiro (1927–2009) and Mitzi Shapiro (1933–2010).

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## Part One: Torture

The first section of the first part of *Discipline and Punish* acts as an overview of the book's argument. Here Foucault outlines his main themes and makes some, perhaps overly, brief comments on the assumptions driving his method of interpreting historical evidence. On first reading, this is one of the book's most dense and at times elusive sections. Consequently, it is helpful to re-read it after having read through to the end of *Discipline and Punish* so that you can begin to notice the moves that Foucault makes and positions he takes very early on in the book.

As we will see, Foucault divides his history of prisons into three historical phases, some of which overlap with one another, causing him sometimes to repeat points in different sections. In general, though, each of the book's first three parts is devoted to a particular period, with Part Four as his critical overview and summary. In the second section of Part One, Foucault details the first of these three phases, what we might call the Age of Terror.

### 1. The body of the condemned

*Discipline and Punish* begins by contrasting two visions of criminal punishment: the 1757 public execution of Robert-François Damiens (1715–1757) for an attempted

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assassination of the French King Louis XV and the 1838 daily schedule for prisoners' activities proposed by the journalist, and later centre-right French minister for the Interior, Léon Faucher (1803–1854).

Foucault starts with contemporaneous newspaper accounts of Damiens' gruesome death. After Damiens was publicly branded with red-hot irons, flesh torn away and body drawn and quartered, as horses ripped the limbs away from his torso, he was finally burnt alive. Against this horrifying, excessive carnival of an individual's suffering, Faucher's calmly regulated plan for the prisoners' day appears to handle criminals in a more dignified and reasonable way, one that carefully avoids chaotic scenes and screams of human pain.

Foucault chooses to contrast the 'public execution and a time-table' (7) as the two overarching markers in his study about changes within the history of punishment. He acknowledges that these two moments are not exactly comparable as items of representative evidence, since they deal with different kinds of crime, the attempted murder of a king, on one hand, and most likely small thefts or disorderly conduct, on the other. Yet the examples of a king's would-be murderer and plans for anonymous men imprisoned for minor crimes neatly captures three larger themes that Foucault highlights throughout *Discipline and Punish*, involving the links among subjectivity, knowledge and power. Foucault argues that during the eighty years separating these scenes 'the entire economy of punishment was redistributed' (7). In the interval between these two events, a wave of prison reform swept across the West as these societies lost their tolerance for circus-like open-air spectacles where the 'tortured, dismembered, amputated



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