

Example of michel foucault and the authoritarian reality of modern society essay

[Education](#), [Discipline](#)



If Foucault was correct, then contemporary society really is an authoritarian, disciplinary state, although it is not necessarily clear that he is right, at least compared to what existed in the past. Nor is present-day society really all that decentralized, given the power of global corporations and powerful institutions like the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund. Most of the new technologies that exist really are under the control of large capitalist interests, which also control governments. In addition, the military power of states is certainly as great as it ever was, including the capacity to destroy the world many times over, so it is difficult to see that power is really all that diffuse and decentralized today—just the opposite. This also means that the classic Marxist analysis about where the real power lies in the modern world is still valid. Certainly women, gays and other minority groups are not really being treated as equals, but neither are the poor and working class, who are the majority of people in the world. It is not clear if they would benefit at all from further weakening of the state, particularly in its regulatory and social welfare functions. A truly libertarian public policy might not benefit these groups at all.

If observation, discipline and control were the true project of modernity rather than increasing individual rights and freedoms, Foucault regarded this as extremely negative. This system did not maintain order and discipline through ‘cruel and unusual’ punishments like flogging, branding or burning at the state, but rather created a new mechanism “that coerces by means of observation” (Foucault 170). Foucault hated the institutions of the modern world because he thought they were very repressive to gays and others considered to be ‘deviant’, and thought that this type of ‘modernity’ was

evil, highly dehumanizing and oppressive. Like many 'postmodern' leftists of the anarchist and libertarian variety, however, he was far clearer on what he opposed and why than in offering plans or prescriptions for what should replace the old state institutions. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault is calling for a new kind of revolution that is not Marxist, since it was not enough for him to overthrow the capitalist class of the state. He was from the generation of May 1968 in France, where a wave of strikes and protests caused the government of Charles de Gaulle to collapse. Similar New Left and countercultural movements existed in the U. S. at that time, as well as many other Western nations. This version of Leftism (or New Leftism) was not simply based in the working class and concerned with economic injustices, but introduced a host of other issues like environmentalism and the liberation of women and gays which had not been a priority for the Old Left. Foucault's critique of modern society is libertarian in the sense that he did not call for overthrowing the old ruling class, but also the bureaucracy and technocracy of the state that had its origins in the 17th and 18th Centuries. Even the so-called 'socialist' societies in China, the Soviet Union and Cuba were bureaucratic police states that had the same type of state institutions as the Western 'bourgeois' states, only more authoritarian and oppressive. Under Communism, the fate of gays and others considered to be social misfits was even worse than in the West, so Foucault's new kind of revolution called for "changing ourselves, our bodies, our souls" in creating a new type of society (Miller 234). Since most of those Communist states have all been overthrown, though, the question remains whether the living conditions of the common people have really improved since that time. In

many cases it is clear that they have not.

Therefore Discipline and Punish can only be read in this context of the new, 'postmodern' left and the identity politics movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Foucault has all the flaws and virtues of those movements in that he had a very good idea of what he was against—the state, the bureaucracy, the Machine, the Apparatus—but only a vague idea of what would replace it. As a leftist or libertarian or even anarchist views, he probably hoped that the Machine would be abolished in favor of communes, collectives, cooperatives and other small associations of free individuals. Although he died before the advent of the Internet and personal computers, he would certainly have seen the liberating potential of all these virtual and online communities that have appeared all over the world. For anarchist and postmodern leftists, the main goal is that the older and more repressive institutions inherited from the past had to be abolished or at least reduced in the power they had over individuals.

Foucault does not state openly that he is gay, but throughout the book there is also a subtext that the modern state had analyzed and categorized all homosexuals as 'deviants', all the better to control or 'cure' them. In that sense, I think that one of the implied themes in this book is gay liberation, which of course only really began in the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This is what he really wants to see, his own people free to express their individualism and sexuality without interference by the state. I have no way of knowing if Foucault believed in a 'soul' at all, at least in the sense that the Platonic Idealists or the Christian theologians did in a nonmaterial entity that survives physical death. I suspect that he did not, but

if he did then he would have said that the minds and souls of gays had been under attack for centuries by enemies who wanted to destroy them spiritually, mentally and physically.

Foucault really did seem to be implying that modernity always had a sort of fascist or authoritarian side right from the beginning, which was true for 18th and 19th Century liberals as well as the 20th Century progressives and socialists. For him the truly ethical type of public policy would be deinstitutionalization, reducing the power of corporations, militaries and large bureaucracies, and creating a new type of education and pedagogy that is not based on coercion and discipline. In the U. S., he certainly would not have approved of a policy that created the largest prison population in the world, with the majority of inmates sentenced on drug charges. As an admirer of the 1960s counterculture, gay and feminist movements he wanted to expand the sphere of individual freedom and autonomy against both the power of the state and the capitalist system. He seemed to admire California as a new type of postmodern society, particularly the ‘liberated’ spaces of San Francisco, where the older, more authoritarian types of modern institutions had weakened their hold over society. This did not mean that he would have embraced the type of postmodernism that is synonymous with global capitalism and the power of large multinational corporations, but rather than he preferred a smaller, more human-scale economy and society. Like many involved in the counterculture and protests movements of the 1960s, he would have preferred a system of communes and cooperatives rather than the large-scale corporate, military and social welfare bureaucracies that dominated society, and certainly would have

opposed the ' military-industrial complex'.

The real hidden theme of this book is liberation of the individual, particularly gay liberation, even though Foucault did not come out and say this directly.

It is certainly implied, though, as is his condemnation of these modern institutions that seem so rigid, unfeeling, impersonal and authoritarian.

These are the types of schools, prisons and asylums where gays were always treated like outcasts, criminals or mental cases by the modern state.

Foucault is probably best understood as an anarchist or left-wing libertarian, but definitely not of the ' bomb-throwing' variety. His policy was a clear-cut rejection of the modern state and its institutions of control, discipline and coercion like the public school, factory, military, asylum and prison. He also opposed any type of socialism or communism that was centered on the authority and control of the state bureaucracy, while also opposing corporate capitalism and its authoritarian factories and offices. Under Foucault's interpretation of modern history, all of these institutions were coercive and repressive from their origins and the main social and political goal was to free individuals from their control as much as possible. In general, he would have agreed with the utilitarian John Stuart Mill in at least one respect: that individuals should be free to live as they wanted provided that they did not harm to others. This is similar to the classic 1960s slogan " I am a Human Being. Do not Fold, Spindle or Mutilate".

That much is clear enough, maximizing the power of the free person and minimizing the discipline and coercion of the state, factory, school and corporation. Whether Foucault's system of maximum individualism could ever be fully practical is another question, since there have always been

those within and outside of society who do wish to do injury to others, or others who are so mentally ill that they cannot function of their own. This brings us back to Thomas Jefferson's observation that if all people were angels then there would be no need for government. Even though Foucault's vision of postmodernity might seem highly desirable in many respects compared to the drab, dehumanized and impersonal institutions he so rightfully condemns, it would also very quickly run into certain limits beyond which a certain degree of coercion and control over some members of society would become necessary. As soon as this is admitted, then there will always be a danger of opening the door once again to the evils he describes. Here again, though, there are many aspects of the modern state such as social welfare, national health care and old-age pensions that have benefitted the masses of people, so simply undermining those in the name of liberation or anti-statism would not really be beneficial to most people in the world. Indeed, they have been undermined in many countries over the last thirty years, along with the power that nation states have traditionally had over social and economic policy. This has not led to a more liberated or libertarian world, however, but one in which large banks and corporations on the international level have more power than ever before. Foucault did not have much to say about this kind of global capitalism, but he probably would not have cared for the results.

WORKS CITED

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Edition. NY: Vintage Books, 1995.

Miller, James. *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. Harvard University Press, 2000.

<https://assignbuster.com/example-of-michel-foucault-and-the-authoritarian-reality-of-modern-society-essay/>