

# Focault- discipline and punish

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



**Introduction:**

M. Foucault. 1975. Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison. New York: Random House Inc. Below is an in depth book review of Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison. The author who compiled the analysis on this is Michel Foucault, whom provided enlightenment on many different aspects of sociology and philosophy- many which are still immensely relevant to societies today.

I will be using this book review to channel an outline of Foucault's work, viewpoints and purposes as such. Along with this I will include my personal critique of my literary experience of the book. I will consider important factors of logic, coherence, evidence, expertise and originality. These specified fields are all crucial to useful and meaningful sociological theories. In brief, my aim is to clarify the argument presented by Foucault and provide my account of its validity.

**Brief Overview:**

Michel Foucault's, Discipline and Punish, provides the reader of the historical timeline which ends at the institution of imprisonment that most modern societies have adopted today. The just of his intentions for the book are presented in the first section. Much of this includes his aim which is to trace the penal system back to its roots in order to define and identify its significance in the present. These roots begin in the seventeenth century. Here public torture and execution prevailed as the form of punishment.

As aspects of society changed, especially power structures, so did this system of punishment- much like in an evolutionary manner. At this point it

is probably important to highlight that a better alternative to the concept of the penal timeline, is rather a cycle- thus making visible the state it was in at birth and plotting its journey to maturity. The model of the prison is not yet a comprehensible result or solution in the beginning sections. Punishments were rather inhumane and gruesome methods of torture and execution which were “ public spectacles”. The point of this was the solidification of the power figures amongst their people.

This notion of power stirred amongst people who were ultimately discontent with the inefficiency of these structures. Whilst attempting to resolve this, a “ reform” was created. Sadly, the preoccupation of the reform blinded people to the inhumanity, suffering and pain being brought upon these so-called criminals. Following this we see the transition to private and secret forms of punishment which was cut-off from public visibility. Coercive practices resulted in submissive criminals, with credit given to new techniques established by adapting and altering out-dated methods.

The separation and the shift of focus from the body to the soul were early defining factors of the modern system. These also form an immensely important theme that is recurrent throughout the book. Foucault’s theoretical cycle of the penal system then moves on to preparation of criminals for their lives after incarceration and attempts to reintroduce these people back into society as respectable civilians. Considering noted critiques on this section, it remains unclear as to whether this was successful at its time of occurrence.

An issue arising along with this stage is that of judgement- who is qualified to pass judgement and what standards are used for comparison? Finally, in the <https://assignbuster.com/focault-discipline-and-punish/>

closing sections of the book we reach the heart of the book where we see the introduction of the first prison- highly influenced by the panoptic, and the penultimate stage which Foucault dates February 22, 1840. This date marks the success of the first carceral system which “perfected” the failures and short-comings of all the previous phases. Currently this institution has embedded itself in society and is the back-bone of order, laws and norms.

The fact that at the moment there is no better alternatives to this, offers the assumption that the modern penal system has succeeded or human sciences are still advancing in order to further evolve current organisation- hence my prior labelling of this phase the “penultimate”. I feel that the purpose of the book is to inform the reader on a long list of various facets relating to sociology. These include the carceral system, the classical period, discipline, norms, power and penalty- to mention only a few. These all have significant importance in human sciences.

My reaction or evaluation will conclude that Foucault has cleverly addressed establishments in sociology whilst using the penal system as a commonality to provide a practical sample- which in turn favours the readers understanding of sociology in general. The audience for this theoretical work is most likely to target scholars of human sciences and philosophy. It may also spark interests of inquiries into the classical period given its historical flair.

### **Main arguments of Discipline and Punish:**

Power: Foucault uses power as a central point of reference for punishing.

All or most aspects of the book revolve around this, or come back to it at a point. According to him, as power structures change, so does the penal system. It adapts to requirements. In the section of the book titled “ Body of the condemned”, we see how torture and punishment was used to reinforce the power of the sovereign. Knowledge is also important to power, because it is seen as the support for power. Those with greater knowledge, tend to yield or accumulate greater power. “ Power produces knowledge . . . power and knowledge directly imply one another . . . here is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. ” Foucault describes that power can range from modifying ones self-control to complete coercion. It is embedded in society and all relations. As long as power relations exist, there will always be inherent authority and control. Here we see the effects of the “ power to judge”. Those possessing power and knowledge use their controls on society to establish norms whereby they evaluate the actions of people.

Post-judgement and examination incarceration is determined by how far the perpetrator strays from “ normal”. In Foucault’s opinion, society has allowed sceptic officials to take the power to judge- people such as medical professionals, psychologists, etc. In essence, it is argued that power controls society, yet it cannot be controlled.

### **Prison as a part of civilisation:**

It is emphasised time and time again throughout the book that the prison is part of society and the two cannot be separated. Prison is based on the

judicial system (laws and rules governing our daily lives), which is embedded and weaved into society.

Often Foucault mentions prisons along with institutions such as schools, hospitals and armies etc. They are all organised using the same framework of control and judgement- which emphasizes his stance that it is a part of society. The penal system of prison is too far incorporated into our lives to deny the connection which exists.

### **Punishment:**

“ The art of punishing must rest on a whole technology of representation” Foucault argues that each punishment should teach a lesson. It should not only take away a delinquent's liberty and freedom, it should make them work, keep them active, enforce good habits.

Prior to this, the penalty should correlate with the crime committed in order to create relevance. It need not be an attempt to control the body, but rather install regulation directed at achieving a goal- such as reintegration into community after incarceration. Discipline must be continuous and must take the role of coercion. This we see from Foucault that it can be done using timetables and ranks- here differentiation of various series is important.

The Body and Soul: Punishment was initially assigned to the physical body using methods of torture for example.

In addition to this, the body could be used to stir fear amongst people during public executions. The body and the visible are reinforcing factors. However, with the changes in power, the body is no longer a target of direct punishment. The body now, as Foucault says, is supervised, controlled and

organised. Although the body is replaced with the soul, it will still share an adjacent bond with punishment. Foucault argues that he produces a “genealogical account for the modern soul”- meaning that he intends to identify where the soul originated. There are two factors to this process in Discipline and Punish.

First it is what is revised above- is the soul takes over from the body as the directive for punishment. Secondly, the shift from body to soul and the new methods of discipline have ultimately generated or created the soul. Unlike the body, there are no limits to how you can penalize the soul.

### **Evaluation of Discipline and Punish:**

Firstly, I will start by commenting on the extent to which the book achieves its desired goal. Foucault initially wanted to provide a power of speech for those confined to a discourse. This includes those who do not have the knowledge required to accumulate power.

I feel that their issues have been brought to light, however the reasons exceeding this is for the purpose of gaining insight into the functioning of society in sociological terms. This does not give attention to their possibly ambiguous labelling of being “ abnormal”. They have purely become a vessel to greater knowledge. Foucault rejected norms as positive determinants. It was seen by him as negative and oppressive. The unusual phenomenon is not a natural process instinctually followed by humans. Foucault strived to highlight this irregularity through his book.

However, when commenting on individuality (which opposes norms) there is an inherent negative notion towards the concept. What then, if against

norms and individuality, does Foucault conceptualise as an alternative? This is a possible indication of an argument which is incoherent and conflicting. Ultimately, as we see towards Foucault's final sections, that his intention was not to ignite conspiracy and doubt in the minds of the reader regarding the prison, but rather to create understanding of its operation and the factors contributing to its processes.

This was done with the utmost success. The historical context and actual case studies used provide valid and convincing confirmation. His views at this point are adequately supported. In terms of possibilities suggested by the book Foucault leaves us with the premise that the carceral system is very destructive in more ways than one. He also provides a new way for us to think of this system- as strong and highly powerful. We see that Foucault is optimistic toward change- thus highlighting prospective opportunities for the carceral system as well as the human sciences as a whole.

The subject matter of the book has to this day not received further research- nothing of such extensive significance. Foucault has successfully provided us with a realistic account into the historical penal system and at the same time addressed common topics in sociology- much like his section on individualism. The material available to us regarding the penitentiary system tends to focus on specific regions or prisons- commonly those in the United States. A book which is well versed on the issue at hand is *Situational Prison Control* by Richard Hartley. However, it still does not divulge into the history and "birth" of the phenomenon.

Foucault successfully identified a research topic which was in need of attention and enlightenment. I feel an aspect Foucault neglected to focus on



was future summations for the penal system and all it entails. We do not see any of his suggestions for possible ways forward or resolutions to the problems that exist. He has a tendency throughout the book, to highlight many downfalls yet no solutions. A few of personal proposals would have stimulated the readers thinking, ultimately opening doors for advancement for progress. Along with the above, I feel there is a lot that needs to be said on social divides amongst society.

Foucault briefly touches on classes and social and economic situation but almost immediately redirected the train of thought. There is more to various demographics which influence all institutions throughout societies. Foucault failed to report on this and the way that their changes affect power relations and ultimately the penal system. Some of these demographics may include gender, age, race and ethnicity.

**Conclusion:**

I constantly referred back to specific criteria when considering the main arguments or theories of Discipline and Punish. This was helpful in concluding my opinion on whether Foucault has successfully argued his theory.

My review concludes that a good research problem was identified and stated. The causes of this were also made apparent to the reader. Foucault carefully planned the way he would take on this topic by testifying clear and concise points of view. At times it felt as though the argument was not coherent in that it would jump from one context to another. However, the main arguments and themes- such as the body and the soul were constantly referred to. This redeemed coherence with a well tied together and relevant

argument- especially in the last section where everything is positioned into place.

The evidence Foucault uses to elaborate his views and arguments are sufficient to enhance the validity of his study and specific arguments. He often provides actual occurrences in history- much like his introduction reporting on Damien's execution in 1757 and referring to the opening of Mettray prison colony. Extensive referencing has been made available allowing further validation of facts. This in turn contributes to his ability to convince and persuade. Michel Foucault most definitely possessed the right attributes and expertise to work on this research problem.

He had extensive training and experience in human sciences, from which he created his career. His direct encounters with the penal systems and prisons also granted him access to knowledge not readily available to others- thus making his expertise relative to the issue at hand. Keeping the shortcomings I have mentioned in mind, I feel that Foucault's arguments are valid and they all have been researched to the point where its concrete significance cannot be denied. Their continued relevance over the years supports my conclusion and it has in general been presented in a clear and concise manner.