

A MACAT ANALYSIS

MICHEL FOUCAULT'S
**DISCIPLINE
AND PUNISH**





An Analysis of

Michel Foucault's

Discipline and Punish

Meghan Kallman
with
Rachele Dini



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www.makat.com
info@makat.com

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CRITICAL THINKING AND *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH*

Primary critical thinking skill: ANALYSIS

Secondary critical thinking skill: REASONING

Michel Foucault is famous as one of the 20th-century's most innovative thinkers – and his work on *Discipline and Punish* was so original and offered models so useful to other scholars that the book now ranks among the most influential academic works ever published.

Foucault's aim is to trace the way in which incarceration was transformed between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. What started as a spectacle, in which ritual punishments were focused on the prisoner's body, eventually became a matter of the private disciplining of a delinquent soul.

Foucault's work is renowned for its original insights, and *Discipline and Punish* contains several of his most compelling observations. Much of the focus of the book is on making new connections between knowledge and power, leading Foucault to sketch out a new interpretation of the relationship between *voir*, *savoir* and *pouvoir* – or, 'to see is to know is to have power.' Foucault also dwells in fascinating detail on the true implications of a uniquely creative solution to the problems generated by incarcerating large numbers of criminals in a confined space – Jeremy Bentham's 'panopticon,' a prison constructed around a central tower from which hidden guards might – or might not – be monitoring any given prisoner at any given time. As Foucault points out, the panopticon creates a prison in which inmates will discipline themselves, for fear of punishment, even when there are no guards present. He goes on to apply this insight to the manner in which all of us behave in the outside world – a world in which CCTV and speed cameras are explicitly designed to modify our behavior.

Foucault's highly original vision of prisons also ties them to broader structures of power, allowing him to argue that all previous conceptions of prison are misleading, even wrong. For Foucault, the ultimate purpose of incarceration is neither to punish inmates, nor to reduce crime. It is to produce delinquency as a way of enabling the state to control and of structure crime.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE ORIGINAL WORK

Michel Foucault was born in 1926 into a wealthy and conservative French family. He studied philosophy, but being gay in a homophobic society took its toll and after a suicide attempt in his early 20s, he was treated in a psychiatric hospital. Foucault is considered one of the most important modern thinkers. His analyses of the interplay of power, knowledge, and the makeup of the individual are considered key contributions to a wide range of academic fields, including sociology, history, and philosophy. Foucault died in 1984 at the age of 57.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF THE ANALYSIS

Dr Meghan Kallman is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Brown University, working in the Department of Sociology. Her research focuses on bureaucratized morality and public altruism. In her spare time, she plays accordion in the Extraordinary Rendition Band, a guerilla activist collective in Providence, RI.

Dr Rachele Dini studied at Cambridge, King's College London and University College London. Much of her current work focuses on the representation of production and consumption in modern and contemporary Anglo-American fiction. She has taught at Cambridge and for the Foundation for International Education, and is now Lecturer in English at the University of Roehampton. Her first monograph, *Consumerism, Waste and Re-use in Twentieth-century Fiction: Legacies of the Avant-Garde*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2016.

ABOUT MACAT

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Professor William Tronzo, University of California at San Diego



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WAYS IN TO THE TEXT

KEY POINTS

- Michel Foucault (1926–84) was a French social philosopher and historian.
- *Discipline and Punish* proposes a theory of modern power relations—the power held by different sections of society—by tracing a history of the modern prison and its impact on other social institutions such as hospitals, factories, schools, and workplaces.
- *Discipline and Punish* has had an impact on the approach taken by scholars in the humanities and social sciences in understanding power, through its investigation of the roles of surveillance*—systematic monitoring—and knowledge-creation in constructing both individuals and relationships.

Who Was Michel Foucault?

Michel Foucault, the author of *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), was a radical French social philosopher, historian, and literary critic. Today, he is widely recognized as being one of the most influential contemporary thinkers in both the social sciences and the humanities.

The son of a surgeon, Foucault grew up in a wealthy and socially conservative home in western France, and enjoyed a privileged

education. Against his father's wishes, he studied philosophy* and the history of science at university, and wrote his PhD thesis on the history of madness. In it, he drew a distinction between mental illness and madness; the latter, he argued, is a social construct based on subjective assumptions.

The thesis was published in English as *Madness and Civilization* and later as *History of Madness*. It was extremely well received, winning the prestigious Medal of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (the French National Center for Scientific Research), the main governmental research organization in France. Foucault's next books were *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *The Order of Things* (1966), and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).

Throughout his life, Foucault remained committed to left-wing politics: he was, for example, a leading anti-prison activist. Much French left-wing activism in the 1960s and 1970s was dominated by certain Marxist* ideas—that is, beliefs derived from the work of the German political theorist Karl Marx*—about the need to end structures of power that exploited wage earners and others. Foucault's intellectual contributions, however, were based on his claim that no one person or group alone possesses power: as the individual is constructed from the power relations in which he or she lives, escape from those power relations is impossible.

What Does *Discipline and Punish* Say?

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault departs from the idea of power as something exerted by the government, by a king, or by those with material wealth. Power, he says, is “discipline.”* It is important to note the particular way in which Foucault uses the word, however; for him, discipline is not the top-down application of direct coercion* but power used in a way that makes the individual self-regulate.

Taking the penal system as an example, he demonstrates how the discipline of the prison is a specific form of power that has become