Michel Foucault: Shift in the concept of body politics from dramatic to mundane form in modern society

Whereas Douglas made analysis of the body politic, referring to the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies (individual and collective) in simple tribal societies, Foucault dealt with body politics in complex, modern democratic-industrialized society (Hughes and Lock 1987 and Cregan 2006). Michel Foucault's work is, in many ways, the most radical and influential social constructionist approach and it goes well beyond seeing the body as a receptor of social meanings. For Foucault, the body is not only given meaning by discourse, but is wholly constituted by discourse. In contrast to the naturalistic approaches, Foucault does not view bodies as naturally different entities whose biological constitution determines and limits permanently the capabilities of human subjects. Instead, bodies are highly malleable phenomena which can be invested with various and changing forms of power. In effect, the body vanishes as a biological entity and becomes instead a socially constructed product which is infinitely malleable and highly unstable (cited in Shilling 2003:65).The Foucauldian approach to the body is characterized, first, by a substantive preoccupation with the body and those institutions which govern the body and, second, by an epistemological view of the body as produced by and existing in discourse (ibid:66). The importance of the body to Foucault is such that he has described his work as constituting a ' "history of bodies" and the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested'. Central to this history is a concern with mapping the relations which exist between 'the body and the effects of power on it'. This includes an examination of how the 'micro-physics' of power operates in modern institutional formations 'through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions'. The body for Foucault is not simply a focus of discourse, but constitutes the link between daily practices on the one hand and the large scale

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organization of power on the other (cited in Shilling 2003:66). Thus, he devised a concept called "bio-power" (where bio implies life) to explain the micro-physics of power and linked it to macro-level of power. Foucault was particularly interested in how liberal governmentalities target life through social and scientific engineering, through expert administration, and through everyday technologies of the self. Life has been a significant problem-solution frame for liberal governmentalities since the eighteenth century. Foucault argued that efforts to understand and administer the life forces of the population have persisted since the eighteenth century, although formulations reflect changing liberal governmentalities producing historically distinct problem-solution frames. Foucault developed the idea of biopower to capture technologies of power that address the management of, and control over, the life of the population. Life, as the central focus, is neither purely accidental nor fully determined. Foucault offered historical contingency when explaining how governmental operations cohere around particular sets of problems, technologies, and forms of expertise. By contingency, Foucault meant that the institutionalized matrices and regularities of conduct that define specific historical strategies of biological government are neither (a) fully or necessarily determined by an underlying structural imperative such as capitalist accumulation or technological "progressive development" nor (b) the result of the arbitrariness of voluntary, rational, or even accidental decision making. Rather, social homologies across the conduct of everyday conduct are achieved in relation to governmental rationalities that link societal governance with everyday life by constituting and binding market, population, and state in relation to common sets of problem-solution frameworks (e.g., health), values (e.g., enterprise), and identities (e.g., entrepreneur) (Nadesan 2008:2).

principles incorporating specific grids of meaning which underpin, generate and establish relations between all that can be seen, thought and said (Shilling 2003:66). A 'discourse' is the sum of an area of knowledge in a given historical period that constitutes a world-view. World-views do, and will continue to, change (Cregan 2006:45). For example, medicine has or is an episteme, in that it has its own authoritative discourse. And it is through those discourses, those

shifting epistemologies, that Foucault's notion of a diffuse power is enabled. It is not a power that resides in any one person's hands, rather it is the sum total of the power of discourses to influence, shape and control, from below. And, most importantly for our purposes, they are enacted on and through the body (Cregan 2006:46).

This transition since seventeenth century involved a change in the target, the object and the scope of discourse. There was a shift in the target of discourse, as the fleshy body gave way to the mind as a focus of concern; a change in the object of discourse, as a preoccupation with matters of death was replaced by interest in the structuring of life; and a change in the scope of discourse, as concern moved away from the control of anonymous individuals to the management of differentiated populations (Shilling 2003).Subjects were no longer formed by discourses which directly constituted the body as flesh but, increasingly, by discourses which indirectly controlled the body by constructing it as a 'mindful body'. In contrast to its antecedent, the mindful body is not just a fleshy object, but is defined through its possession of consciousness, intentions and language. It is controlled less by brute force, as in traditional societies, and more by surveillance and stimulation (Shilling2003).Precisely, Foucault points out, that since the seventeenth century the West has undergone a very profound transformation in terms of mechanisms of power. Little by little, the violent sovereign power has been replaced by the power that Foucault calls bio-power. In short, sovereign power, exercises his right to life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing, the sovereign right as the power of life and death is in reality the right to take life or to let live. According to Foucault, although the law is the sovereign's principal means of ruling, the ultimate reference point is the sword: "Law cannot help but be armed and its arm, par excellence, is death (Ojakangas 2005:6).In the case of bio-power it is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and utility. Its task is to take charge of life that needs a continuous regulatory and corrective mechanism. The logic of bio-power is not deduction but production: "It exerts a positive influence on life, endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it." Bio-power replaces the right to "take life and let live" with that of a power to foster life – or disallow it to the point of death. Instead of being exercised by means of law and violence, bio-power is exercised through the normalising biological, psychological and social technologies – through the "methods of production (Ojakangas 2005:6). So, from this angle, he made a distinction between sovereign power and bio-power.

So, torture addressed the soul through the vehicle of the body in the past. Under monarchical law the most serious categories of punishment took place in public where the criminal was ritually burned, assaulted and dismembered in a symbolic display of the sovereign's authority. The body was a highly visible target of penal repression, and offenders had their penalties inscribed in detail on their bodies (Shilling 2003 and Hughes and Lock 1987).However, contemporary psychiatry, medicine, and "corrections" address the body through the soul and mind of the patient or inmate. For instance, the prison system of the nineteenth century placed the bodies of offenders in a scientifically managed institutional space as a way of gaining access to their minds. This was epitomized by the Panopticon (literally a building), a prison design advocated by Jeremy Bentham- an English reformer. The design consists of separate cells for each criminal – in which they are constantly visible through a grilled front. The Panopticon was a circular building of cells where prisoners were always available for surveillance from a central watch-tower. Prison guards, who are not visible, watch the prisoners from this tower. Being under the

constant gaze of an overseer, this disciplinary technique was meant to encourage prisoners to monitor themselves and exert self-control over their behavior. The power of the panopticon lies in self-regulation. The 'penitent' cannot see the warders – never knows for certain if the warder is actually watching or even in the tower – but under the unseen but all-seeing eye regulates his or her behaviour as if s/he is under observation. What in comparison to flaying and torture at first appears to be a 'lenient' and 'redemptive' system of rehabilitation actually relies on absolute authority. Foucault uses the term 'panopticon', like 'the gaze', to describe the full political outcome of the absorption into oneself of self-regulatory behavior that stems from the belief that one is always being watched (cited in shilling 2003 and Cregan 2006:56).

This manifestation of power extends to a range of arenas in which docile bodies are trained into submission: for example, in military service, and in educational models, etc. 'A glance at the new art of punishing clearly reveals the supersession of the punitive semio-technique by a new techniques of the body'. The carceral becomes a part of society in general, based in a new system of law, and a new system of general self- and other-control. The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power ... The carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation; it is, by its nature, the apparatus of punishment that conforms most completely to the new economy of power and the instrument for the formation of knowledge that this very economy needs. For Foucault, the deeper lesson to be learned is that the prison is not the only imprisoning object in society, it is 'linked to a whole series of "carceral" mechanisms which seem distinct enough – since they are intended to alleviate pain, to cure, to comfort – but which all tend, like the prison, to exercise a power of normalization' (cited in Cregan 2006:57).

Finally, the transition from traditional to modern societies was accompanied by a change in the scope of discourse. The attention of governments shifted from a concern with controlling relatively anonymous individual bodies, to regulating the population as a whole. This provided a context in which detailed control could be exerted over much larger areas of society, and knowledge gained about the population for use in policy and planning decisions (for example, schools enabled governments to monitor the health of children) .

Second, these changes brought with them a change in the means by which control was accomplished. There was a reduction in the achievement of control through repression, and an increased focus on maintaining control through the stimulation of desires. Foucault argues that this has become increasingly apparent with the development of capitalism. For example, economic development initially brought with it great concentrations of bodies in cities that needed to be made serviceable and safe as a precondition of commercial success. In essence, the emergence of bio-power as a major force in shaping, eliciting, and controlling populations is inextricably linked with historically contingent developments in liberal, and now neoliberal, forms of government. And yet, there is more to bio-power than the productive, cybernetic administration of life. Bio-power may also serve the interests of capitalist accumulation and market forces by eliciting and optimizing the life forces of a state's population, maximizing their capacity as human resources and their utility for market capitalization. Bio-power can therefore supplement and extend the power of capital to expropriate value from the relations of production. For example, efforts to manage the health of populations through pharmaceutical interventions serve market interests by relying on commodity solutions (e.g., drugs) and by purportedly

delivering a healthier workforce without changing the conditions under which workers labor, without changing market commodities consumed by labor (e.g., soda), and without changing industrial pollutants that affect workers' health. Accordingly, bio-power may be mobilized and promulgated by market forces, but not all expressions of this form of power necessarily serve market interests or express underlying class conflict. The complex operations of power and the web of entanglements and sites of contradiction and conflict are also evident within the state itself. The state, a loosely coupled matrix of institutions and authorities, is rent by contradiction and antagonism as its various agencies and expert authorities simultaneously cooperate with, and resist, alliances with market and social activists (Nadesan 2008).

In this context, from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, power constituted bodies through what would now be considered to be 'heavy, ponderous, meticulous and constant' disciplinary regimes in schools, hospitals, barracks, factories and families. In the twentieth century, though, more discriminatory forms of control over the body became widespread which were more productive in their social and economic effects. As Foucault argues, with reference to the representation of the body in consumer culture, 'we find a new mode of investment which presents itself no longer in the form of control by repression but that of control by stimulation. "Get undressed - but be slim, good looking, tanned " (Cregan 2006).

Changes in the scope of discourse were also evident in the realm of sexuality. Discourses on sex moved away from the individual body, and focused instead on the reproductive fitness of the social body. For example, from the eighteenth century there was a large increase in discourses on sexuality which linked the sex of individual bodies to the management of national populations. This happened through the creation of four major discursive figures: the 'hysterical woman' (limited and defined by her sexuality); the 'masturbating child' (prone to engage in immoral behavior which, through the depletion of vital energies, posed dangers to the future health of the race) ; the 'Malthusian couple' (socialized into bearing children according to the needs of society); and the 'perverse adult' (whose sexual instincts deviated from the legitimate norm). The dominance of these discursive figures meant that the 'legitimate heterosexual couple' tended to function as a norm, classifying other people's and other forms of sexuality as deviant. Taken together, these changes in the social spaces occupied by discourses had two major related consequences which are relevant to the connection of embodied individuals to large-scale systems of power. First, they allowed governments to exert a far greater degree of control over individuals than had previously been the case. As discourse moved away from the relatively limited space encompassing the individual, the body and death, to the (ibid: 68) much broader space incorporating the mind, the population and life, people could be made more separate and different and, hence, more controllable (Cregan 2006).

Both, however, serve the goal of producing "normal" and "docile" bodies for the state. Torture offers a dramatic lesson to "common folk" of the power of the political over the individual body. The body politic can, of course, exert its control over individual bodies in less dramatic and mundane, but no less brutal, ways. Foucault's analyses of the role of medicine, criminal justice, psychiatry, and the various social sciences like sociology, anthropology and social work in producing new forms of power in knowledge over bodies are illustrative in this regard (Hughes and Lock 1987 and Cregan 2006).

The influence of Foucault's work is such that it is now justifiable to talk of a Foucauldian approach to the body. For example, the pioneering work of Bryan Turner (1 983, 1 984, 1 98 7) on the body in social theory, religion and medical sociology, draws heavily on Foucault's work. Many other studies on the socially constructed body, concerned with such issues as medical knowledge, desire, dentistry and the Welfare State, also owe a great debt to Foucault (cited in Shilling 2003:64). This approach has proved especially popular with feminist scholars who have used Foucault's work to argue against the notion that the natural body (ibid:69) is the basis on which individual identities and social inequalities are built, and to support the argument that gendered identities are fractured, shifting and unstable. In a related vein, feminists have also used Foucault to challenge the 'sex-gender' division common to social science. Foucault's approach has been used to argue that those biological features usually thought of as differentiating between the 'sexes' are themselves socially constructed, and that power is invested in and exercised through bodies in ways which produce gendered forms of embodiment. Foucault's notion of training up bodies is also extended recently by Elias. The study of the training up of the body, whether through manners, implicitly takes the body as an entity under the control of some other force. That force may seem to be external, in court-ratified modes of behaviour, high-culinary tastes or socially ratified life-stages, but in each case they are in fact behavioural modifications that require the 'object' to internalise systems of control (cited in Cregan 2006:10).

However, his theorization of body has been critiqued by many. For instance, Shilling (2003) argued that there is, however, a fundamental tension in Foucault's approach to the body which means that his work is unable to overcome the dual approach sociology has traditionally adopted to the body. On the one hand, there is a real substantive concern with the body as an actual product of constructing discourses. For example, Foucault is often concerned with the body as a real entity, as when he examines the effects of scientific thought and disciplinary technologies on the body. Somewhat ironically, given the emphasis Foucault places on historical discontinuity in his work, this leads him to treat the body as a trans-historical and cross-cultural unified phenomenon. The body is always already there to be constructed by discourse. Irrespective of the time or the place, the body is equally available as a site which receives meaning from, and is constituted by, external forces. This view provides no room for recognizing that different aspects of human embodiment may be more or less open to reconstruction depending upon specific historical circumstances. On the other hand, Foucault's epistemological view of the body means that it disappears as a material or biological phenomenon. The biological, physical or material body can never be grasped by the Foucauldian approach as its existence is permanently deferred behind the grids of meaning imposed by discourse. This is why according to Shilling, one gets a sense when reading Foucault that his analyses are somewhat disembodied. The body is present as a topic of discussion, but is absent as a focus of investigation. He is deeply concerned with disciplinary systems and sexuality, for example, but the body tends to become lost in his discussions as a real, material object of analysis. Once the body is contained within modern disciplinary systems, it is the mind which takes over as the location for discursive power. Consequently, the body tends to be reduced to an inert mass which (ibid: 70) is controlled by discourses centred on the mind. Likewise, Turner (1984) notes that despite all his references to pleasure and desire, Foucault ignores the phenomenology of embodiment. The 'immediacy of personal sensuous experience of embodiment which is involved in the notion of my body receives scant attention (cited in Shilling 2003:70)."Continuing with this, Cregan (2006) pointed

out another problem in Foucault's approach. Given how persistent the privileging of the mind over the body has become in the three-and-a-half centuries since Descartes dozed off in front of that mind-altering fire, it is not surprising that the recuperation of the body into social theory should have begun in terms of its status as an objectified entity. Each of the theorists while working hard to recuperate embodied being, does so (to varying degrees) by dealing with the body in its material, objectified state. Controlling, shaping and regulating behaviour is effected through the 'training up' of bodily motion or bodily habits. In doing so, even while there is an implicit credence or value accorded to physical being, the bifurcation between mind and body remains. The mind takes control of that in which it lives, even if it is seen as a slightly more symbiotic relationship than a ghost controlling a machine (ibid:10).