



**HAL**  
open science

## Michel Foucault's bodies

Mathieu Potte-Bonneville

► **To cite this version:**

Mathieu Potte-Bonneville. Michel Foucault's bodies. The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 2012, 43 (1), pp.1-32. halshs-00777003

**HAL Id: halshs-00777003**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00777003>**

Submitted on 16 Jan 2013

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Michel Foucault's Bodies

Mathieu Potte-Bonneville

The case seems settled: both in the field of the social sciences and in the discourses that accompany various contemporary political protests, Michel Foucault's legacy is that of an eruption of bodies in at least two respects. Firstly, as an object of research, as is shown by the countless studies that borrow, more or less explicitly, from the programme announced in *Discipline and Punish* and developed in *The Will to Knowledge*, a programme whose categories are criticized only to better accept its fundamental horizon. This programme comprises a "political history of bodies" that carefully transfers their constitution from nature to history and that underlines how much the definition of their identity and reciprocal relations (whether of class, race or genre) is traversed by various forms of domination.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, such an enterprise is often presented by its initiators not merely as an internal inflection of academic research, nor as the quest for a paradigm able to dominate a particular historical or philosophical issue, but as an echo of, and a contribution to, the disruptions that took place in what should be called the cultural, social and political regime of bodies within this closed field of theory. Thus, in the 1999 second introduction to her classic *Gender Trouble*<sup>2</sup>, Judith Butler locates her book at the intersection of two movements, both leading outside the academic realm. On the one hand, the book, she explains, born from an autobiographical experience, is marked by a fourteen-year involvement in the gay and lesbian culture of the East coast of the United States of which it is an "interior product".<sup>3</sup> As for its reception, Butler congratulates both herself for finding readers and her book for engendering effects outside the academic sphere through movements such as Queer Nation or Act Up. Thus the

---

<sup>1</sup> The recent study by Elsa Dorlin, *La Matrice de la race - généalogie sexuelle et coloniale de la nation française* (Paris, La Découverte, 2006) would provide French bibliography with an excellent example of the posterity of the Foucauldian problematics

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Trouble dans le genre*, tr. Fsse E. Fassin, Paris, La Découverte, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> *op.cit.*, p.38.

“gender trouble” of the title should not merely be understood to refer either to an object of enquiry, or to the introduction of certain changes within the traditional conception of the genre, of which Butler, simply because of her intellectual position, would be the instigator. If theory provokes trouble, it is first because the register in which it deploys itself and the domination it usually claims vis-à-vis the social world are themselves disrupted by the breakthrough of an instance ordinarily kept at a distance—namely, the body of its author, her emotions and their fraying:

Though *Gender Trouble* is an academic book, it began, for me, with a crossing-over, sitting on Rehoboth beach, wondering whether I could link the different sides of my life.<sup>4</sup>

The mention, at the beginning of the book, of this body sitting at a seaside resort—which is also one of the centres of North-American gay and lesbian culture—is not merely an autobiographical interpolation; in its own way it also has a Foucauldian heritage. In her way of putting an intellectual argument and an immediate physical experience side by side—an experience from which the theory arises and that it attempts to rejoin—Butler silently mimics the way in which Foucault, in 1972, made the mutinous bodies of the prisoners into the stimulus for the composition of *Discipline and Punish*, the instigators of the upheaval this work aspired to produce in both its reflection on prisons and the privileged recipients of this new perspective. Thus he was able to write, regarding the mutinies that occurred in French prisons in 1971:

That punishment in general and the prison in particular belong to a political technology of the body is a lesson that I have learnt not so much from history as from the present. [...] In fact, they were revolts, at a bodily level, against the very body of the prison. What was at issue was not whether the prison environment was too harsh or too aseptic, too primitive or too efficient, but its very materiality as an instrument and vector of power [...] I would like to write the history of this prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> “Même si *Trouble dans le genre* est un ouvrage universitaire, tout a commencé pour moi par un chassé-croisé, alors que j’étais assise sur la plage de Rehoboth à me demander si je pouvais relier les différents aspects de ma vie”, *op.cit.*, p.39.

<sup>5</sup> ET 30. “Que les punitions en général et que la prison relèvent d’une technologie politique du corps, c’est peut-être moins l’histoire qui me l’a enseigné que le présent. (...) Il s’agissait bien d’une révolte, au niveau des corps, contre le corps même de la prison, ce qui était en jeu, ce n’était pas le cadre trop fruste ou trop aseptique, trop rudimentaire ou trop perfectionné de la prison, c’était sa matérialité dans la mesure où elle est instrument et vecteur de pouvoir. (...) C’est de cette prison, avec tous les investissements politiques du corps qu’elle rassemble dans son architecture fermée, que je voudrais faire l’histoire”, Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, Gallimard, coll. “Bibliothèque des histoires”, Paris, 1972, p.35.

From *Discipline and Punish* to *Gender Trouble*, from the prison roof in Toul to Rehoboth beach, as the example of Judith Butler shows, a part of Foucault's contemporary posterity resides in this asserted coupling, in this link between the renewal of the theoretical comprehension of bodies and the way in which, on the outside, they assert their presence, their requirements and their irreducibility to the structures imposed on them.

The coherence of such a coupling must still be justified. It is not that the circularity of this "history of the present"<sup>6</sup> is misleading in itself: it is that the categories supposed to account for the transformations of the contemporary world owe their own renewal to these transformations; that these crises provoke a conceptual shake-up by dint of which it becomes possible to "think of them differently", is what is at stake in the entire Foucauldian archeological enterprise. Rather, if there is a difficulty to be had, it is to be found in the differing manner in which the reference to the body tends to be articulated on each side of such a system or, at least, between the beginning and the end of the enquiry. On the one hand, at the beginning of the analysis, Foucault concedes that fighting and the shadows of the prisoners on the roof are an immediate and constitutive presence. He attributes to them the capacity to force their way into theory, crediting them with a disruptive power capable of opening a space for new investigations in the thinking process. On the other hand, at the end of a route of which the aim would have been to show how what we take as the immediate given of our worldly being actually springs from a conflicting genealogy; the body will have become the mere product of circumstance, an effect whose precarious consistency becomes dissolved into history. From the initial impulse to the final picture, the reference to the body thus oscillates between accounting for an instance whose demands impose themselves imperiously, and the decomposition of a historical construction endowed with an artificial and transitory unity. If, through the immediacy of their refusal (revolts

---

<sup>6</sup>ET 31 *ibid.*

“against cold, suffocation and overcrowding, against decrepit walls...”<sup>7</sup>), the prisoners’ revolts strike a chord with Foucault, the analysis which follows rather tends to multiply mediations and to show how “the individual [...] is a reality constructed by this specific technology of power which is called discipline”<sup>9</sup>. As Michel de Certeau already pointed out, “we find in Foucault a theory of the body as an unreadable condition of the fiction of the body itself”<sup>10</sup>.

### **The body and its doubles**

We should take our time, however, before proclaiming a double bluff because the whole interest of the approach lies, it seems, in this very tension, in this paradoxical complementarity outside of which each side would be weakened. It is the least interesting aspect of Foucault’s legacy to see occasionally these two modes of reference to the body distancing each other in order to create two series of equally unproductive affirmations. On the one hand, there is the monotonous evocation of the resistance of the body to political order, of its stubborn and silent opposition to all the forms of oppression; on the other hand, there is the litany of monographs which have no benefit other than that of establishing the cultural dimension of those physical determinations hitherto unduly attributed to nature. But the problem is therefore that of knowing how this double position of the body (as the foundation and the result of history, as condition and horizon of the theory that takes hold of it) can avoid extending the two mistakes correctly denounced by Foucault himself:

1. Of avoiding entering what was called “the empirico-transcendental doublet” in *The Order of Things*, a position characterised in that work as both the principle of the modern *episteme* and the sign of its closure. As Foucault showed, once the positive contents offered to that knowledge that presents

---

<sup>7</sup> ET 30 “contre le froid, contre l’étouffement et l’entassement, contre les murs vétustes...”, *Surveiller et Punir*, p.34.

<sup>9</sup> “l’individu (...) est une réalité fabriquée par cette technologie spécifique de pouvoir qu’on appelle la discipline”, *op.cit.*, pp.195-196.

<sup>10</sup> “on a chez Foucault une théorie du corps comme condition illisible des fictions, et une théorie des fictions de corps”, M. de Certeau, “L’histoire une passion nouvelle”, *Le Magazine littéraire*, avril 1977, n°123, pp.22-23, in J.-F. Bert, *Michel Foucault, regards croisés sur le corps - histoire, ethnologie, sociologie*, éditions du Politique, 2007.

man as a living, speaking, working being, reveal themselves as the conditions of possibility of this knowledge, then reflection can only trample indefinitely between each one of these poles. As it does so it becomes proportionately less certain of its operations as they are discovered as being profoundly rooted in the mundane co-ordinates of human experience. We should emphasise that in the typology proposed by Foucault to describe this game of mirrors between “man and his doubles”, the first of these “positive forms in which man can learn that he is finite” is well and truly the body: “to man’s experience a body has been given, a body which is his body – a fragment of ambiguous space, whose peculiar and irreducible spatiality is nevertheless articulated upon the space of things”<sup>11</sup>. And yet, genealogy seems rightly to extend this intellectual strategy: it depends here on the transformation arising from the eruption of the bodies in the social field in order to retrace the steps and the forms of their historical constitution. Can we avoid, henceforth, reproducing the gesture which, according to Foucault, condemns the human sciences to the endless repetition of the Same, by transferring the conditions of the possibility of knowledge on to the facts offered to it?

2. A normative difficulty is added to this epistemological problem. How to make the immediacy of bodies, their protests and their demands, the guiding thread of an active critique without indirectly extending the fiction of an instance so far repressed and kept at the edge of history? And how, in this instance, to avoid reinforcing the idea, considered by Foucault as suspicious, according to which emancipation would rediscover what has been kept silent for too long? It is in *The Will to Knowledge*, this time, that the problem becomes more apparent, as the book takes to such a high degree of radicality the idea, on the one hand, of a historical-political constitution of the body and, on the other,

---

<sup>11</sup> ET 314 “formes positives où l’homme peut apprendre qu’il est fini (...) à l’expérience de l’homme, un corps est donné qui est son propre corps - fragment d’espace ambigu, dont la spatialité propre et irréductible s’articule cependant sur l’espace des choses”, Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, reed. Paris, Gallimard (coll. “Tel”), p.325.

the affirmation that the calls for liberation contribute effectively to maintaining the modern system of power. Refusing the horizon of a “sexual liberation”, Foucault claims that on the contrary, we ought to understand how the instance of sex, and its supposed concealment, are actively produced by the organisation of power-knowledge which he calls “the system of sexuality”: what properly qualified the profound aspirations of the body, is thus exposed to the effects of social construction. In the same movement, however, answering the question that looks for an appropriate opposition to such a system, the text calls for the body:

It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim – through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality – to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures and their knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistances. The tallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.<sup>12</sup>

Given that sex is a product of the mechanisms of sexuality and furthermore given that to these mechanisms should be opposed this body and its pleasure, how can one avoid naturalising the latter? How can one avoid playing to the “repressive hypothesis” which throughout this first volume of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault asks us to distance ourselves from.

In order to respond to this question, we must pay attention to detail. “The body” that Foucault invokes here is not exactly the “sex” that he represents, in the singular, as a construction. From one to the other there is a numerical difference that is understood as not merely playing a quantitative but also an operative role insofar as it helps to distinguish the different registers of the analysis. Unity, diversity and multiplicity are staggered in this passage and come to characterise respectively the phenomenon whose justification is at stake (“the agency of sex”); the mechanisms which combine to produce it (“the various mechanisms of

---

<sup>12</sup> ET 157, “C’est de l’instance du sexe qu’il faut s’affranchir si, par un retournement tactique des divers mécanismes de la sexualité, on veut faire valoir contre les prises du pouvoir les corps, les plaisirs, les savoirs, dans leur multiplicité et leur possibilité de résistance. Contre le dispositif de sexualité, le point d’appui de la contre-attaque ne doit pas être le sexe-désir, mais les corps et les plaisirs”, Michel Foucault, *La Volonté de Savoir*, Paris, Gallimard (coll. “Bibliothèque des histoires”), 1976, p.208.

sexuality”); the constitutive elements, in other words, of this operation, the surfaces of inscription, for “the factory of sex” and the principles of its possible destabilisation: “bodies, pleasures, and knowledges in their multiplicity”, “bodies and pleasures”. We do not face, therefore, a circular argument of which the same body would constitute at the same time both the starting point and the destination, but a layered analysis where Foucault distributes, in several distinct registers, the acceptations ordinarily confused with the general notion of the body. Without doubt, any philosophy rigorously beginning to approach this object, is constrained to such an ordering: whoever claims to treat the subject of the body is soon led to distinguish and articulate at least the question of one’s own body, of the living body and finally of the material body. If Foucault’s approach is distinct, as we will see, it is by his way of conducting this analysis in reverse and performing decisive inversions of it. In short, contrary to all phenomenology, he firstly gives the lived consciousness of one’s own body the anonymous objectivity that constitutes the body; then, contrary to all research into essences, he derives this very unity from the multiplicity of the bodies and their socio-political interaction. Let us now examine these different aspects.

### **The body: an archeology of one’s own body**

An often acknowledged interpretation claims that Foucault only made reference to the body at the beginning of the 1970s, influenced both by a careful reading of Nietzschean genealogy<sup>13</sup> and the deadlock to which archaeology succumbs, because it is too exclusively discursive, and therefore incapable of giving a foundation to statements and of explaining the passage from one *episteme* to another<sup>14</sup>. Such a reading is justified: we will come back to this. But one cannot forget that the research undertaken during the 1960s, far from ignoring the body, already placed it as one of the central points of focus through *The Birth of the Clinic*, published in 1964. The point of this work is firstly to show how it is possible to relate the birth of

---

<sup>13</sup> The essay “Nietzsche, la généalogie, l’histoire” testifies to this. See Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, T.II, Paris, Gallimard (coll. “Bibliothèque des sciences humaines”), 1994, Text 84.

<sup>14</sup> This is the reading particularly defended by H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, Michel Foucault, un parcours philosophique, Gallimard (coll. “Bibliothèque des sciences humaines”), 1984, ch. V.



modern medicine, not to the discovery of the truth of disease already available in things, but to the re-organisation of the social, discursive and epistemic conditions of medical experience itself. As the conclusion of the book states:

For clinical experience to become possible as a form of knowledge, a re-organisation of the hospital field, a new definition of the status of the patient in society, and the establishment of a certain relationship between public assistance and medical experience, between help and knowledge, became necessary. [...] It was also necessary to open up language to a whole new domain: that of a perpetual and objectively based correlation of the visible and the expressible.<sup>15</sup>

By choosing to proceed in this way, Foucault nonetheless forces himself to find another way of researching the “conditions of the possibility of medical experience”. This other strategy, starting from the observation according to which the strictly objective comprehension of the body is powerless to ground itself, would consist in rooting it in the originary experience of the lived body, not understood as a sensible apprehension preceding a rigorous knowledge, but as the condition of every presence of the subject to the world and to itself. We will have recognized, in this alternative route, the approach developed in French phenomenology by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Structure of Behaviour* (1942) and *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) constitute the background from which Foucault’s work aims to distinguish itself. From this sort of rivalry between historical archeology and phenomenology there ensues a peculiar mix of proximity and distance vis-à-vis the Merleau-Pontian characterisation of the body. Thus one can hear Foucault, during a 1966 radio conference, adopting a very close position to the one of Merleau-Ponty:

[My body] is linked to “elsewhere” in the world, and, actually, it is somewhere else than in the world. For it is around it that things are disposed and it is in relation to it as in relation to a sovereign, that there is an above, an under, a right and a left, a forwards and a backwards, a near and a far... The body is this small utopian core at the heart of the world from which I dream, speak, go forward, imagine, and perceive things in their own place”.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> ET 242 “Pour que l’expérience clinique fût possible comme forme de connaissance, il a fallu toute une réorganisation du champ hospitalier, une définition nouvelle du statut du malade dans la société et l’instauration d’un certain rapport avec l’assistance et l’expérience, le secours et le savoir (...) il a fallu ouvrir le langage à tout un domaine nouveau ; celui d’une corrélation perpétuelle et objectivement fondée du visible et de l’énonçable”., Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique*, réed. Paris, PUF (coll. “Quadrige”), 1993, pp.199-200.

<sup>16</sup> “(Mon corps) est lié à tous les ‘ailleurs’ du monde, et à vrai dire, il est ailleurs que dans le monde ; car c’est autour de lui que les choses sont disposées, et c’est par rapport à lui, comme par rapport à un souverain, qu’il y a un dessus, un dessous, une droite, une gauche, un avant, un arrière, un proche, un lointain... Le corps est au coeur du monde, ce petit noyau utopique à partir duquel je rêve, je parle,

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, it is a matter of conversely taking a step backwards vis-à-vis this sovereignty granted to the lived body concerning the organisation of the world. Foucault's argument consists in defending the following: if modern objective knowledge is, as Merleau-Ponty claims, dependent on a more fundamental corporeity, it is not necessary to see an essential datum here, returning to the root of the *cogito* in the experience of one's own body; rather it is a fact of history, linked to a change in the "fundamental structures of knowledge"<sup>17</sup>, a structure of which the subject is not the centre. In any case, it is the thesis which is announced with clarity in the last section of the work: Foucault makes positivism, which apprehends the body as exteriority, and phenomenology, which claims on the contrary to install it at the very centre of experience, opposing slopes of the same historical configuration:

That with which phenomenology was to oppose (positivism) so tenaciously was already present in its underlying structures: the original powers of the perceived and its correlation with language in the original forms of experience, the organization of objectivity on the basis of sign values, the secretly linguistic structure of the datum, *the constitutive character of corporal spatiality*, the importance of finitude in the relation of man with truth, and in the foundation of this relation, all this was involved in the genesis of positivism [...] so much so that contemporary thought, believing that it has escaped it since the end of the nineteenth century, has merely rediscovered, little by little, that which made it possible.<sup>18</sup>

As far as we are concerned, this passage can be read thus: if phenomenology is right to bring back the knowledge of the body – the knowledge in particular that medicine develops – to a system of conditions that is not revealed by the sole authority of facts, and which would impose themselves and derive their sense from themselves out of the concern for objectivity, it is in turn mistaken about its own

---

j'avance, j'imagine, je perçois les choses en leur place"., Michel Foucault, "Le corps utopique", radiophonic conference from December 21<sup>st</sup> 1966, available on France-Culture CD, coll. "INA / Mémoire vive".

<sup>17</sup> ET 246 TM. *Naissance de la clinique*, p.202.

<sup>18</sup> ET 246 "Ce que la phénoménologie opposera (au positivisme) avec le plus d'obstination était présent déjà dans le système de ses conditions : les pouvoirs signifiants du perçu et sa corrélation avec le langage dans les formes originaires de l'expérience, l'organisation de l'objectivité à partir des valeurs du signe, la structure secrètement linguistique du donné, le caractère constituant de la spatialité corporelle, l'importance de la finitude dans le rapport de l'homme à la vérité et dans le fondement de ce rapport, tout cela était déjà mis en jeu dans la genèse du positivisme (...) si bien que la pensée contemporaine, croyant lui avoir échappé depuis la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, n'a fait que redécouvrir peu à peu ce qui l'avait rendu possible"., op.cit., p.203, underlined by us.

account when it posits its conditions as an ahistorical experience, when it claims to deduce them from the manner in which, for all of eternity, my body is given to me (and gives me the exterior world as its relation, turning the latter into an organised, spatialised and significant system). If we follow Foucault, we must however rediscover both “the body”, such as it is understood by modern medicine, and “my body” from which phenomenology tries to unfold experience, as two sides of the same historical transformation, one that initiates the development of a body offered to the gaze and a body speaking about itself, and we must derive both of them together from an encounter with exterior determinations – social forms, perceptual codes, discursive structures.

This diversion is at the heart of the argument from the very first chapter of the work. Entitled “Spaces and Classes”, it is characteristic of the two-way movement according to which Foucault deals with the question of the body. Noting that “to our well-worn eyes, the human body defines, by natural right, the space of origin and of distribution of disease”<sup>19</sup>, he endeavours however to establish that “the exact superposition of the ‘body’ of the disease and the body of the sick man is no more than a historical, temporary datum [...] The space of *configuration* of the disease and the space of *localisation* of the illness in the body have been superimposed, in medical experience, for only a relatively short period of time.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, for the classifying medicine of the eighteenth century, disease first of all is defined in the taxonomic space which links it to the other maladies according to relations of genre and the species. As for this first distribution, the localisation of the disease in the body of the patient plays a lateral role, a “secondary spatialisation” which inflects symptoms in the same way that in botany the geographical distribution of a species, the soil and depth on which it grows, are able to modify some of its characteristics without changing its essential definition. “The

---

<sup>19</sup> ET 2, “pour nos yeux déjà usés, le corps humain constitue, par droit de nature, l’espace d’origine et de répartition de la maladie (...) la coïncidence exacte du ‘corps’ de la maladie et du corps de l’homme malade n’est sans doute qu’une donnée historique et transitoire (...). L’espace de configuration de la maladie et l’espace de localisation du mal dans le corps n’ont été superposés, dans l’expérience médicale, que pendant une courte période”, *op.cit.*, p.1.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

same, single spasmodic malady may move from the lower part of the abdomen, where it may cause dyspepsia, visceral congestion, interruptions of the menstrual or haemorrhoidal flow, towards the chest, with breathlessness, palpitations, the feeling of a lump in the throat, coughing and finally reaching the head...”.<sup>21</sup> What interests Foucault is visible in the faltering regard induced by the exhibition of medicine from another age. His approach can be analysed as follows: 1) At the start, he questions the positivist reduction of the body to an object in which, for all eternity, the disease would have been readable as long as we want to see it: the fact that the disease unfolds itself in the space of the body is an event which, as phenomenology maintains, requires a displacement away from objective vision. 2) However, digging into the medical archive will allow us to locate this “constitutive character of corporeal spatiality” where the phenomenologist was not expecting it: not in the intimacy of the experience that the subject has of his own body and through his own body, but in the recovery of two spaces, at first mutually exclusive— classified and organic space; that is, the “flat, homogenous, homologous space of classes” and the “geographical system of masses differentiated by their volume and distance”<sup>22</sup>. 3) As for this train of thought, it is important to account for the way in which the modern subject acquires a body that is “his own body” – in the present case, a disease that really is his own, for it will no longer be indifferent to its definition that it appears at such a point of the organism. But this transformation does not show, as phenomenology claims, the regaining of a relation to the self that would be older than any possible objectification. The deep intimacy between the disease and the patient follows from the first exteriority and the overlap between the spaces where knowledge was distributed up until then. One could say that where Merleau-Ponty brings back the ‘body as object’ to one’s own body, which gives it its sense and permits its understanding, Foucault argues that this “own” [*propre*] is first of all alien [*impropre*], as it results from historical events that are

---

<sup>21</sup> ET 10, Une seule et même affection spasmodique peut se déplacer du bas-ventre où elle provoquera des dyspepsies, des engorgements viscéraux, des interruptions du flux menstruel ou hémorroïdal, vers la poitrine avec des étouffements, palpitations, sensation de boule dans la gorge, quintes de toux et finalement gagner la tête...”, *op.cit.*, pp.8-9.

<sup>22</sup> ET 9 “espace plat, homogène des classes (...) système géographique de masses différenciées par leur volume et leur distance”, *op.cit.*, p.8.

both contingent and diverse and, as such, the basis of this seizing of the self completely and definitively escapes the subject. Foucault finds the sign of this dispossession and expropriation from which the complete grasping of man by himself emerges in Bichat's injunction "open up some corpses". It is from this injunction that the dissection will stitch together both the list of symptoms and the anatomical observation and confirm, at the same time, that "the first scientific discourse [delivered by our culture] concerning the individual had to pass through this stage of death".<sup>23</sup>

Thus, seeming to borrow the regressive path of phenomenology, in order to abruptly change tack towards history, serves a precise purpose, beyond the disagreement regarding the foundation of knowledge. This purpose could already be called ethico-political, even though this terminology only appears later-on in Foucault's work. The issue is in effect for Foucault to consider the deep solidarity, within modernity, that unites the objective gaze that puts the body in the role of a thing offered to observation, with the discourse that asserts, on the contrary, the dignity of the experience of one's own body and its irreducibility to all external comprehension. Is it really possible to oppose to the body-machine and the science which takes hold of it, the eminence and authenticity of the lived body, on the pretext that the latter would be both the foundation and the limit of all knowledge of the body? Reading between the lines, this question is inevitably posed in a book upon the *Birth of the Clinic*, upon the reasons which incite science to stand at the patient's bedside. And yet, the indications made by Foucault do not allow much room for doubt concerning his position. On the one hand, the fiction of an immediate and sensible relation between the doctor and his patient and the invocation of their mutual understanding is unable to account for the appearance of modern medicine as science of the individual:

Our contemporaries see in this accession to the individual the establishment of a 'unique dialogue', the most concentrated formulation of an old medical humanism, as old as man's compassion [...] the feebly eroticized vocabulary of 'encounter' and of the 'doctor/patient

---

<sup>23</sup>ET 243 op.cit., pp.200-201.

relationship' exhausts itself in trying to communicate the pale powers of matrimonial fantasies to so much non-thought Clinical experience.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, if Foucault is so virulent, it is because such approaches obscure what (according to him) is the real historical event which accounts for the appearance of modern medicine:

This new structure is indicated – but not, of course, exhausted – by the minute but decisive change, whereby the question: 'What is the matter with you?', with which the eighteenth century dialogue between the doctor and patient began (a dialogue possessing its own grammar and style), was replaced by that other question: 'Where does it hurt?', in which we recognize the operation of the clinic and the principle of its entire discourse.<sup>25</sup>

We touch here upon the link that unites, since the works of the "archeological" period, the "historical and critical"<sup>26</sup> dimensions of Foucault's reflection. Neither the attempt to go beyond the opposition between positivism and phenomenology, nor the effort to let their common historical surface appear, are strangers to this enigma: in modernity, the renewed access of man to himself, articulated in the objective discourse of science or in the reflexive forms of an analysis of lived experience, is united in a dispossession in which the body is only speaking *for* the other or *through* the other, under the scrutinising gaze or attentive ear, in a structure where, in any case, the interpretation of signs duplicates itself in the establishment of an asymmetrical relation which Foucault will later call the power relation. If access to the individual, an event which both begins and ends *The Birth of the Clinic*, cannot be understood through the sole exploration of one's own body; it is also because the latter is unable to realise the solidarity between the understanding of oneself and the rise of the little question: "where does it hurt?", a question which entirely reorganises the relations between the doctor and his

---

<sup>24</sup> ET xvi "Cet accès à l'individu, nos contemporains y voient l'instauration d'un "colloque singulier" et la formulation la plus serrée d'un vieil humanisme médical, aussi vieux que la pitié des hommes. (...) le vocabulaire faiblement érotisé de la 'rencontre' et du 'couple médecin-malade' s'étend à vouloir communiquer à tant de non-pensée les pâles pouvoirs d'une rêverie matrimoniale", op. cit., pp.X-XI.

<sup>25</sup> ET xxi "Cette nouvelle structure est signalée, mais n'est pas épuisée bien sûr, par le changement infime et décisif qui a substitué à la question : 'Qu'avez-vous?', par quoi s'inaugurait au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle le dialogue du médecin et du malade avec sa grammaire et son style propres, cette autre où nous reconnaissons le jeu de la clinique et le principe de tout son discours : 'Où avez-vous mal?'", op.cit. p. XIV.

<sup>26</sup> ET xxi, op.cit., p. XV.

patient and empowers the former over the latter. If *The History of Madness* was meant to be “the archeology of silence”<sup>27</sup>, *The Birth of the Clinic* leaves discreet but decisive room for the silence of the patient.

### **The body: genealogy of the individual body**

If we spent a long time considering *The Birth of the Clinic*, it is because it seems possible to recognise some germinal elements in it, even to shed some light on the proliferation of bodies which will mark Foucault’s works in the following decade. Where then, to locate the break, if it is true that the references to the body do introduce a transformation, between the “archeology” of the 1960s and the “genealogy” practiced in *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will to Knowledge*? In fact, we must make a distinction here: if from 1964 the body is an object and an issue for critique, at the beginning of the 1970s it becomes a tool, an operator, of the approach itself, Foucault relying henceforth on the reference to the body to clarify the way in which his critical categories could be ambiguous and unsatisfactory.

Foucault explains this new usage in a lecture given at the beginning of 1973, whose posthumous publication throws a vital light over the whole period.<sup>28</sup> Explaining why he plans to return in that year to psychiatry, which he studied fifteen years previously in *The History of Madness*, he blames himself for too often using the notion of “violence” at that time in order to qualify Esquirol’s or Pinel’s use of physical force during their asylum treatments. At the same time, the critical tone of the book implicitly relies on an unquestioned opposition between a “violent” power and another power which is not violent. Such a supposition would introduce, he adds in 1973, two defects. Firstly, it makes it possible to assume the existence and legitimacy of a power which, because it is not physical, would therefore be non-violent. Secondly, it tends to identify all physical expression of power with the unpredictable exercise of an irregular force, making imperceptible the part of

---

<sup>27</sup> “Préface” (first preface to *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*), Dits et Ecrits, T.I, p.160.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, “Leçon du 7 novembre 1973”, in *Le pouvoir psychiatrique, cours au Collège de France 1973-74*, Paris, Gallimard-Le Seuil (coll. “Hautes Etudes”), 2003. pp.8 sq.

rationality involved in the use of force and the plurality of ways in which it can be organised. To these two defects, Foucault endeavors to make two corrections, perceptible through two theses announced in this lecture course:

...what is essential in all power is that ultimately its point of application is always the body. All power is physical, and there is a direct connection between the body and political power.<sup>29</sup>

...power is physical (...) not in the sense that it is unbridled, but in the sense, rather, that it is commanded by all the dispositions of a kind of microphysics of bodies<sup>30</sup>

The reader of *Discipline and Punish* will recognise in these two precepts, announced in a tone of regret, the foundations of the “microphysics of power” employed in the study of discipline. From now on, taking into account the fate of the body will play a double role. Firstly, it will look to demystify all approaches to social phenomena limited solely to the consideration of the discourse of legitimation which supports them or to the legal forms which organise them: to remind us that “all power is physical”, is especially to forbid the understanding and evaluation of modernity in accordance with the humanism to which it lays claim, insofar as it claims to have substituted for bodily constraint a whole set of relations controlled and authorised by law. Secondly, the minute attention applied to the body will have to show that, on a physical level, the historical difference regarding the exercise of authority does not involve a move from brutal violence to disembodied obligations, but is rather between various modes of organisation of power, each of them constituting a “rational, calculated, and controlled game”<sup>31</sup>. The aim is therefore to contest all legal-political idealism in the name of the materiality of the body and to shed light on the various forms of rationality, if not “idealism”,<sup>32</sup> immanent to them. The whole economy of *Discipline and Punish* is situated between these two gestures for

---

<sup>29</sup> ET 14, “...ce qu’il y a d’essentiel dans tout pouvoir, c’est que son point d’application, c’est toujours, en dernière instance, le corps. Tout pouvoir est physique, et il y a entre le corps et le pouvoir politique un branchement direct”, *op.cit.*, p.15.

<sup>30</sup> ET 14, “...le pouvoir est physique (...) non pas au sens où il est déchaîné, mais au sens, au contraire, où il obéit à toutes les dispositions d’une espèce de microphysique des corps”, *op.cit.*, p.16.

<sup>31</sup>ET 14 *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> On “ideality” of disciplinary rationality, see the Foucault’s remarks in “La Table ronde du 20 mai 1978”, *Dits et écrits*, T.IV, p.28. The double status, material and ideal of what Foucault calls “discipline” obviously pose particular problems. On this subject, see P. Artières et M. Potte-Bonneville, *D’après Foucault*, Paris, Les Prairies ordinaires, 2007, ch.IV.



the sake of one and the same objective: to shake the acknowledged opposition between the penalty of an ancient regime founded on violence and the modern prison, an institution in which obedience to the principles of the state would suffice to guarantee humanity.

To this alternative, Foucault responds thus: 1) The establishment of legal equality amongst citizens, the codification of procedures or the establishment of a scale of punishments do not prevent the necessity for power to have a hold over the body. Furthermore, they require as a condition for their exercise a preliminary ordering of society through mechanisms which allow the application of legal forms but continuously bias the effect.<sup>33</sup> 2) This critique which reveals the body beneath reason, does not, however, work without another movement which discloses and differentiates the modes of rationalisation of the body: in the section called “torture”, Foucault shows that the apparent barbarity of the punishments of the ancient regime complies with a precise economy which regulates its procedure and links its protocol to the intrinsic logic of royal power: “penal torture’ does not cover any corporal punishment : it is a differentiated production of pain, an organised ritual for the marking of victims and the expression of the power that punishes”<sup>34</sup>. It is not that Foucault is looking to bring back instruments of torture such as quartering, the wheel or pliers. It rather concerns taking apart the discourse which, by returning ancient forms of punishment to an ageless barbarity, claims in contrast to exonerate modern penalty by locating it on the side of an immaterial intervention, only concerned with the “soul” of the condemned. He aims overall to show that a precise rationality was already involved in the most brutal punishment inflicted on the body. The body still contributes to a regime which would claim to be the pure incarnation of reason. The issue is therefore not to confuse everything

---

<sup>33</sup> On this double relation of opposition and complementarity, see notably the relation between juridical law and disciplinary forces of opposition, *Surveiller et Punir*, p.224 sq.

<sup>34</sup> ET 34 “le supplice pénal ne recouvre pas n’importe qu’elle punition corporelle : c’est une production différenciée de souffrances, un rituel organisé pour le marquage des victimes et la manifestation du pouvoir qui punit”., *Surveiller et Punir*, p.39.

but to apprehend, in its uniqueness, the political technologies through which the body is kept in order.

It is at the heart of this renewed programme, directed towards challenging the fact that modern politics transcends the level of physical relations between individuals, and also that this relation comes down to the uncontrolled exercise of brutal force that the questions already presented in *The Birth of the Clinic* return. Let us once more consider the three affirmations put forward by Foucault: 1) an intimate solidarity links the body as object offered to an objective knowledge and “my body” as lived experience, calling for a reflexive elucidation: beyond their apparent opposition, both emerge from the same matrix. 2) Therefore, *a parte subjecti*, the relation that each person experiences with his or her own body is intertwined with an exteriority where the threat of dispossession is posed from the question “where does it hurt?” which turns speech into a symptom, right up to Bichat’s dissections. 3) Critiquing this modern arrangement of the body must involve a history of the individual and not a fundamental experience in which the self-affecting subject reconquers its integrity. This history would establish how the individual far from being an infrangible given, is the result of the exterior intersection of historical determinations and political operations. These are the three claims which are going to be fully developed through the genealogy of power, elaborated in particular in *Discipline and Punish* and in *The Will to Knowledge*. Being unable to recall here all the remarks that Foucault devotes to the body, we will limit ourselves to indicating what regulates its economy.

1) *A false alternative*. The particular manner in which these works seem to form a diptych is instructive. It seems at first glance that they are differentiated from each other by the experience of the body which they put forward: in 1975, *Discipline and Punish* deals essentially with the observed body, that is, exposed to a scientific characterisation and a technical reorganisation that maximises its utility and obedience:

The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely.<sup>35</sup>

In 1976, in *The Will to Knowledge*, it is the speaking and spoken body that is put into question, a body of which each manifestation demands not an exterior and objective description, but a deciphering of which the subject itself is both the source and the rule, the text and its reader, a proximity of which the fable of the speaking sex invented by Diderot in *Les Bijoux indiscrets* would become the emblem:

For many years, we have all been living in the realm of Prince Mangogul: under the spell of an immense curiosity about sex, bent on questioning it, with an insatiable desire to hear it speak and be spoken about, quick to invent all sorts of magical rings that might force it to abandon its discretion.<sup>36</sup>

It is thus striking to see Foucault, in the space of one year, thematising the presence of the body in modernity under two figures not only different, but seeming, firstly, to exclude one another. On the one hand, the disciplinary operations are characterised by the eviction of significant elements of behaviour solely for the sake of the account of its determination and physical effects: “constraint bears upon [...] forces rather than upon [...] signs; the only truly important ceremony is that of exercise”<sup>37</sup>. Foucault devotes considerable attention to this discarding of meaning in the management of the body, showing how, in the chapter “The Gentle Way in Punishment”, silent imprisonment has by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century overcome a “semi-technical” penalty founded on ceremony and representation<sup>38</sup>. As for the enquiry into sexuality, this leads to completely opposite results: “We have placed ourselves under the sign of sex, but in the form of a *Logic of Sex* rather than a

---

<sup>35</sup> ET 137-8 “Le moment historique des disciplines, c’est le moment où naît un art du corps humain, qui ne vise pas seulement la croissance de ses habiletés, ni non plus l’alourdissement de sa sujétion, mais la formation d’un rapport qui dans le même mécanisme le rend d’autant plus obéissant qu’il est plus utile, et inversement”. *Surveiller et Punir*, p.139.

<sup>36</sup> ET 77 “Nous vivons tous depuis bien des années, au royaume du prince Mangobul : en proie à une immense curiosité pour le sexe, obstinés à le questionner, insatiables à l’entendre et à en entendre parler, prompts à inventer tous les anneaux magiques qui pourraient forcer sa discrétion”. *La Volonté de Savoir*, p.101.

<sup>37</sup> ET 137 “la contrainte porte sur les forces plutôt que sur les signes ; la seule cérémonie qui importe vraiment, c’est celle de l’exercice”, *Surveiller et Punir*, p.139.

<sup>38</sup> *Surveiller et punir*, particularly pp.116-134.

*Physics*<sup>39</sup>. A multiplication, this time, of signs and of meaning. And yet, these *a priori* incompatible forms of attention to the body are eventually reintegrated within one and the same history, as the last chapter of *The Will to Knowledge* converts them into two major poles of power over life, poles “linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations” which Foucault calls “an *anatomic-politics of the human body*” and “a *bio-politics of the population*”<sup>40</sup>. No preeminence, then, of the intimacy with his own body experienced by modern man and of the interpretation that prolongs it over the operations which deny corporeality all significant value, claiming to explain it objectively and to modify it technically. On the contrary, from a methodological point of view, it is surely essential that the enquiry undertaken in *Discipline and Punish* precedes the analyses in *The Will to Knowledge*: the anti-hermeneutic principle that governs the first book (“beneath every set of figures, we must seek not for a meaning, but a precaution”<sup>41</sup>) allows, in the second book, this sidestep which, rather than accepting the body as an object for interpretation, takes this very interpretation as an object of history. In other words, it is necessary to have measured how modernity could meticulously eradicate the slightest element of meaning from the relation that each person experiences with their own body, in order to reveal in all of its strangeness the surfeit of meaning that individuals give at the same time to their sex. It is necessary to have taken the measure of this “anatomy of detail” constituted by the disciplines in order to shed another light on this discourse where the subject, in the first person, seeks its own identity in the wanderings of its desires. Not as the revelation of a deep truth wrongly hidden by the objectifications of the body, but as the effect of a primordial “incorporation”, and as the anonymous exteriority of practices and social institutions.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> ET 78 “Nous nous sommes placés nous-mêmes sous le signe du sexe, mais d’une Logique du sexe, plutôt que d’une Physique”, *La Volonté de Savoir*, p.102, underlined by Foucault.

<sup>40</sup> ET 139, *La Volonté de savoir*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>41</sup> ET 139 “sous les moindres figures, chercher non pas un sens, mais une précaution”, *Surveiller et Punir*, p.141.

<sup>42</sup> On “the incorporation” of perversions, see *La Volonté de savoir*, pp.58-60.

2) *Objectification and reflexivity*. The historical contemporaneity of the body-object and of the signifying body also implies a game of reciprocal borrowings between the processes that give birth to each of these figures. In other words, as opposed as they may seem, one would not dissociate entirely the techniques which institute, from the outside, the body as object of knowledge and those which, contrarily, compel the subject to acknowledge itself and provide explanations for itself through discourse. According to H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow,<sup>43</sup> *Discipline and Punish* would demonstrate the grounding of the “objectifying social sciences” in the practice of the examination<sup>44</sup> and *The Will to Knowledge* would demonstrate the grounding of the “subjectifying social sciences” in the ritual of confession.<sup>45</sup> But such a distinction only carries a relative value because the aim of these two books is to show how each of these processes essentially embraces a moment borrowed from another: there is no disciplined body without a “subjection” which exceeds its strict physical determinations. Similarly, there is no body that is sexualised without the constitution of an objective knowledge of, and a subordination to, the other which exceeds the framework of the strict relation to oneself.

This intertwining is thematised, in *Discipline and Punish*, through the famous metaphor of the soul, allowing the reversal of the Platonic *soma sema*.

The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. A ‘soul’ inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.<sup>46</sup>

The modern transformation of penal practice with which the book starts is targeted here. It is a transformation which sees modern judgment shift from the criminal character of facts towards the personality of the accused and the biographical origins of his gesture through “a whole set of assessing, diagnostic, prognostic,

---

<sup>43</sup> H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault, un parcours philosophique*, chap. VII-VIII.

<sup>44</sup> On examination, see *Surveiller et Punir*, pp.186-196.

<sup>45</sup> On confession, see *La Volonté de savoir*, pp.78-84.

<sup>46</sup> ET 30, “L’homme dont on nous parle et qu’on invite à libérer est déjà en lui-même l’effet d’un assujettissement bien plus profond que lui. Une ‘âme’ l’habite et le porte à l’existence, qui est elle-même une pièce dans la maîtrise que le pouvoir exerce sur le corps. L’âme, prison du corps.”, *Surveiller et Punir*, p.34.

normative judgments concerning the criminal”<sup>47</sup>. And yet, Foucault is so far from considering this shift merely illusory, as if this dual quest for the meaning of crime and punishment were only hiding the strictly corporeal efficiency of discipline, that he will return to “microphysics” in order to unveil it: the soul involved here is not only a mirage but a “part”, which means that the concrete reference to the personality of the criminal is an indispensable element in the coordinated functioning of the diverse instances henceforth involved “in the framework of penal judgment”<sup>48</sup>. In short, the exteriority of knowledge and intervention secured by discipline on the body of the individual calls for the reference to the interiority of a “who?” likely to confirm in the first person the legitimacy of inflicted treatments, just as in the case of the modest residents of the penitentiary colony in Mettray whose voices end *Discipline and Punish*:

...the inmates [...] in singing the praises of the new punitive policies of the body [would remark]: “We preferred the blows, but the cell suits us better”.<sup>49</sup>

As for *The Will to Knowledge*, this movement is reversed since the book is concerned with revealing the “objectifying moment” hidden within the device of sexuality, even though the latter is firstly defined as a permanent incitement to reflexivity as the social production of a hermeneutic relation of every individual to himself. On the one hand, Foucault clarifies that the way in which individuals go and seek their truth through their own sex is historically accompanied by an apparently more theoretical and exterior discourse, where medieval pastoral care strongly maintained links to the interrogation of the flesh and the practice of penitence:

the secure bond that held together the moral theology of concupiscence and the obligation of confession (equivalent to the theoretical discourse on sex and its first-person formulation) was, if not broken, at least loosened and diversified: between the objectification of sex in rational discourses, and the movement by which each individual was set to the task of recounting his own sex, there has occurred, since the eighteenth century, a whole series of tensions.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> ET 19, *op.cit.*, p.24.

<sup>48</sup> ET 19, *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> ET 293, “...les colons disaient couramment, pour chanter les louanges de la nouvelle politique punitive des corps : ‘Nous préférons les coups, mais la cellule nous vaut mieux’, *op.cit.*, p.300.

<sup>50</sup> ET 33-34, “le lien solide qui attachait l’une à l’autre la théorie morale de la concupiscence et l’obligation de l’aveu (le discours théorique sur le sexe et sa formulation en première personne), ce

However, if this disjunction is possible, it is because the logic of confession, which according to Foucault originates from the twofold contemporary search for the truth of sex and the truth of the self through sex, is itself traversed by a fundamental ambivalence. It is “a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement”, but that notwithstanding, the effects of the statement provoke “intrinsic modifications” in the speaker. It is, therefore, in a sense a pure game played by oneself with oneself. However, the confession is not conceivable without “the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile”<sup>51</sup>. We once more discover here a general aspect of Foucault’s thought: a suspicion of the same kind which led him in the *History of Madness* to revised downward the value of self-consciousness promised by asylum treatments and to read it instead as the “humiliation of being an object for oneself”<sup>52</sup>. As far as we are concerned, we will note that the reflexive relation of every individual towards his or her own body, as described in *The Will to Knowledge* in the nodal reference to sexuality, is essentially compromised by the form of an objective knowledge in which Foucault does not see a vector of emancipation but an anchoring point of power relations at the very core of oneself. In short: my body is not disciplined like an object: sooner or later it requires my own narration; similarly I cannot admit who I am to myself without making use of the distance required by both knowledge and the gaze, vis-à-vis my lived body.

3) *A history of the individual*. How does one characterise the body thus constituted at the crossroads between disciplinary normalisation and the hermeneutics of

---

lien a été sinon rompu, du moins détendu et diversifié: entre l’objectivation du sexe dans des discours rationnels et le mouvement par lequel chacun est mis à la tâche de raconter son propre sexe, il s’est produit depuis le XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle une série de tensions...”, *La Volonté de Savoir*, pp.46-47.

<sup>51</sup> ET 61-62, “la présence au moins virtuelle d’un partenaire qui n’est pas simplement l’interlocuteur, mais l’instance qui requiert l’aveu, l’impose, l’apprécie et intervient pour juger, punir, pardonner, consoler, reconcilier”, *op.cit.*, p.83.

<sup>52</sup> *Histoire de la folie*, p.519.

desire? It is perhaps here that the concept of the *individual* would best designate the vanishing point of the various enquiries that Foucault undertook. The idea may seem paradoxical: is not the individual, on the contrary (and according to etymology), that indivisible entity grasped by discourse and power as the material upon which they operate, and which they tend to conceal under various historical figures? We touch here on the heart of suspicion of the initially evoked circularity which for Foucault seems sometimes to make the individual the support, and sometimes the product, of discursive and social processes. However, the ambiguity comes undone as soon as we detect that Foucault distinguishes several times between bodies and individuals' bodies, making of the latter a historical and political transformation of the former. It is thus, for example, that we must understand this passage from *The Will to Knowledge*, which describes how power works:

It did not set boundaries for sexuality; it extended the various forms of sexuality, pursuing them according to lines of indefinite penetration. It did not exclude sexuality, *but included it in the body as a mode of specification of individuals.*<sup>53</sup>

Such a statement is unintelligible if we do not grasp that the "specification", far from being applied to bodies whose individuality would be entirely fixed beforehand, instead contributes to their determination by calling on everyone to recognise and distinguish themselves through the objects, practices, etc on which they fix their desires. The individual body is thus described by genealogy, not as pre-political unit of analysis but as the superimposition of a series of processes of individualisation, whose solidarity and variety Foucault underlines.

It is thus that *Discipline and Punish* can define the modern individual body as the synthesis of four characteristics working alongside four disciplinary techniques whose logic is different and complementary:

To sum up, it might be said that discipline creates out of the bodies it controls four types of individuality, or rather an individuality that is endowed with four characteristics: it is cellular

---

<sup>53</sup> ET 47, "Il ne fixe pas les frontières de la sexualité ; il en prolonge les formes diverses, en les poursuivant selon des lignes de pénétration indéfinie. Il ne l'exclut pas, *il l'inclut dans le corps comme mode de spécification des individus*", *La Volonté de Savoir*, p.64, underlined by us.



(by the play of spatial distribution), it is organic (by the coding of activities), it is genetic (by the accumulation of time), it is combinatory (by the composition of forces).<sup>54</sup>

We can see that if *The Birth of the Clinic* considers how modernity could have lifted “the old Aristotelian prohibition”, that is to say “one could at last hold a scientifically structured discourse about the individual”<sup>55</sup>, the answer provided in *Discipline and Punish* consists, on the one hand, in linking this structure not to an internal evolution of the history of biology, but to its social matrix, and on the other hand, in showing that certain epistemological alternatives concerning the very status of individuality (such as the rivalry between the models of the machine and the organism to which Georges Canguilhem<sup>56</sup> devoted his attention, a fact which is not ignored by Foucault) can find a common foundation in the history of the various techniques of keeping the body in order. The human individual is not indebted to a mechanical, organic or dynamic understanding without firstly being shaped by being distributed in tables and classifications *as well as* by its enlistment in operations *and* by the virtues of exercise.<sup>57</sup> In addition to this already complex portrait, *The Will to Knowledge* contributes the correlation between at least two modes of individualisation: on the one hand, what should be called a subjective identification, taking the form of a personal discourse about oneself; on the other hand, an objective differentiation, opposing diverse types of bodies by attributing a threat and a mode of precise normalisation to them. On one side, the body individualises itself as in the source in which everyone seeks their identity, whilst trying to discern its own identity according to a dual quest for the “true sex”, a task which Foucault will later summarise as follows:

---

<sup>54</sup> ET 167 “En résumé, on peut dire que la discipline fabrique à partir des corps qu’elle contrôle quatre types d’individualité, ou plutôt une individualité qui est dotée de quatre caractères : elle est cellulaire (par le jeu de la répartition spatiale), elle est organique (par le codage des activités), elle est génétique (par le cumul du temps), elle est combinatoire (par la composition des forces)”. *Surveiller et Punir*, p.169.

<sup>55</sup> ET xv, *Naissance de la clinique*, p. X.

<sup>56</sup> G. Canguilhem, “Machine et organisme”, in *La Connaissance de la vie*, Paris, Vrin, 1952.

<sup>57</sup> On these various techniques constituting discipline, see *Surveiller et Punir*, chap. “les corps dociles”.

At the crossroads of these two ideas - we must not be mistaken concerning our own sex and the fact that our sex conceals what is truest within us - psychoanalysis has rooted its cultural strength therein.<sup>58</sup>

On the other side, bodies are differentiated according to the type of social intervention which they call for and justify by becoming the centre of a particular concern: *The Will to Knowledge* thus indicates, as the direction for future research (research that Foucault will however set aside), the necessity to describe the process of the “hysterisation of women’s bodies”, the “pedagogisation of children’s sex”, the “socialisation of procreative behaviour”, and the “psychiatrisation of perverse pleasure”,<sup>59</sup> as so many forms within which modern bodies are forced to be distributed and through which they acquire their individual definition.

There is therefore (and this should be enough to prevent any “liberal” interpretation of Foucault as a defender of the sovereign-individual) an essential disparity in the ways in which the individuality of men is formulated through the insertion of the body in social relations of a certain type. There follows from this one consequence and one problem. The consequence is that this individuality of the body cannot be given the support of rights opposed to all political intervention, for this individuality cannot be considered as an entity anterior or exterior to the intervention itself. Nor can the latter be exerted without conflict or resistance, without something resisting its development, but we cannot play with the categories of the individual, in order to qualify this “something”, without remembering that these categories are behind the type of normalisation that this point of resistance holds in check. This is what Foucault clearly indicates in his lecture *The Abnormals*, concerning the figure of “the individual to be corrected”: a figure born in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, in order to qualify those who escape the “new procedures of training of the body, of behaviour, and of aptitude”; but a figure whose characterisation as an individual has the aim of reinserting him within

---

<sup>58</sup> ET 104-5 “Au point de croisement de ces deux idées - qu’il ne faut pas nous tromper en ce qui concerne notre sexe, et que notre sexe recèle ce qu’il y a de plus vrai en vous - la psychanalyse a enraciné sa vigueur culturelle”.

<sup>59</sup> *La Volonté de Savoir*, pp.137-139.

the social game, “in this game (...) between the family and then the school, the workshop, the street, the district, the parish, the church, the police, etc.”.<sup>60</sup> The goal will not then be, from a critical and practical standpoint, to withdraw the individual body from the hold of power, classically defined as State Sovereignty, but “to free us from the State and from the type of individualisation which is linked to it”.<sup>61</sup> The problem is then: what consistency can we give to this “us”, if it must at the same time be distinguished from a collection or an association of individuals and also remain anchored in the reference to the body which regulates, from start to finish, the genealogical critique?

### **The Body: Towards an Ethics of Heterogeneity**

In order to find an answer to this question it is necessary to introduce a third register of reference to the body, whose recurrence within Foucault’s work follows another rhythm and another periodisation than that which we have already come across. Neither a question exerting its influence from a work which takes it for an explicit object (as is the case in the relation between one’s own body and the living body in *The Birth of the Clinic*), nor a method serving to singling out a precise period in the work (as is the case with “the microphysics of power” of 1973), but an ancient and an erratic counterpoint, springing-up whilst reading the texts, without much explanation or justification. This is indicated by a sibylline declaration from the inaugural lecture of 1970 at the Collège de France:

The result is that the narrow gap which is to be set to work in the history of ideas [...] this narrow gap looks, I’m afraid, like a small (and perhaps odious) piece of machinery which would enable us to introduce chance, the discontinuous, and materiality at the very root of thought.<sup>62</sup>

This materialist claim could be surprising within a text essentially devoted to the elucidation of the category of discourse (to the point which Foucault feels

---

<sup>60</sup> “dans ce jeu (...) entre la famille et puis l’école, l’atelier, la rue, le quartier, la paroisse, l’église, la police, etc.”, Michel Foucault, *Les Anormaux - cours au Collège de France 1974-1975*, Paris, Gallimard-Le Seuil (coll. “Hautes Etudes”), 1999, pp.53-54, 308-309.

<sup>61</sup> “Le sujet et le pouvoir”, *Dits et écrits*, T.IV, p.232.

<sup>62</sup> ET 69, “Le mince décalage qu’on se propose de mettre en oeuvre dans l’histoire des idées (...) je crains bien d’y reconnaître quelque chose comme une petite (et odieuse peut-être) machinerie qui permet d’introduire à la racine même de la pensée le hasard, le discontinu et la matérialité”., Michel Foucault, *L’Ordre du discours*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, p.61, underlined by Foucault.

compelled, in order to qualify his approach, to call it a curious “materialism of the incorporeal”<sup>63</sup>). However, this claim teaches us a lesson that is two-fold . Firstly, it indicates that the concern with materiality precedes the moment in the work when Foucault refers to the destiny of the body so as to demystify the legal and idealist approach to society. At the very beginning of its critical function, beyond the sole enquiry into human individuality, the model of material bodies tries very early on to colour the kind of regard Foucault gives to his historical objects, regardless of their discursive nature. Secondly, this “odious machinery” does not aim at providing a “real basis” to history such as, for example, a determined, stable and solid cause comparable to matter itself. On the contrary, materiality is merely convoked here to be immediately associated with “chance” and “discontinuity” as if it were a matter of thus dispersing the foundation of things, of frustrating every search and every promise of sense and unification, a little like the way in which, for Epicurus and Lucretius, the forms offered to the experience and imagination of men turn out eventually to be nothing more than momentary combinations of atoms without profound significance and born from the necessary laws of the movement and the forever inexplicable event of the clinamen. The pregnancy of such a “corpuscular” model occasionally shows itself at the very surface of the texts, in order to characterize the final term in the analysis of power: “I have gone in search”, Foucault writes, “of these sorts of particles endowed with an energy all the greater for their being small and difficult to discern”.<sup>64</sup>

To follow this track would once more detect in Foucault the presence, in the background of the analysis, of a reference to the body which could be said, without paradox, to be essentially plural. Regularly, Foucault inserts at the very place where philosophers normally locate the founding and unitary authority of an essence, an irreducible multiplicity from which individualised figures emerge (but which for this very reason they are also varying and precarious). This affirmation, as we have just

---

<sup>63</sup> ET 69, *op.cit.*, p.60.

<sup>64</sup> ET 161, “J’étais parti, écrit Foucault, à la recherche de ces sortes de particules dotées d’une énergie d’autant plus grandes qu’elles sont elles-mêmes plus petites et difficiles à discerner”, M. Foucault, “La vie des hommes infâmes, *Dits et écrits*, T.III, p.240.

seen, precedes the adoption of the genealogical paradigm and its attention to the physical dimension of power: we find traces of it as early as the *History of Madness*, where what Foucault calls 'unreason' sometimes takes on the features of a force which, as in Goya, challenges the unity of the body and the face.<sup>65</sup> But above all it will provide the support lacking in the history of the processes of individualisation, developed by Foucault in the 1970s, by locating "the bodies" in their innumerable plurality at the core of a political history of the body and of the individual forms it successively adopts. Therefore, we can read in *Discipline and Punish*:

[disciplinary power] "trains" *the mobile, confused, useless multitudes of the body and forces* them into a multiplicity of individual elements - small separate cells, organic autonomies, identities and genetic continuities, combinatorial segments.<sup>66</sup>

However, with this kind of reference, do we go beyond the "fortunate positivism"<sup>67</sup> which Foucault calls for, towards a metaphysics praising, at the core of the real, a power of metamorphosis of which the human body would only be one manifestation amongst others? In the comparison he makes of Foucauldian and Marxist materialisms, Etienne Balibar points to this suspicion, noting that "the question cannot fail to be addressed of what in Foucault's materialism and historicism lead to the immediate proximity of vitalism, not to say biologism,"<sup>68</sup>. One could add that the reinterpretation by Toni Negri of Foucauldian bio-politics in the sense of its integration within a philosophy of life as the multitude's power of self-affirmation has subsequently provided a frank answer to this question.<sup>69</sup> We will not discuss here the political fecundity of this reading; it seems to us that it does not correspond to Foucault's intention when he talks of "the body". For our purposes, this reference does not aim at opening the historical enquiry to a more fundamental horizon, which would both establish its ontological basis and its

---

<sup>65</sup> *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, reed. Paris, Gallimard (coll. "Tel"), 1972, pp.550-551.

<sup>66</sup> "(le pouvoir disciplinaire) 'dresse' les multitudes mobiles, confuses, inutiles de corps et de forces en une multiplicité d'éléments individuels - petites cellules séparées, autonomies organiques, identités et continuités génétiques, segments combinatoires"., *Surveiller et Punir*, p.172, underlined by us.

<sup>67</sup> *L'Ordre du discours*, p.72.

<sup>68</sup> "La question ne peut pas ne pas être posée de ce qui, dans le matérialisme et l'historicisme de Foucault, amène au voisinage immédiat du vitalisme, pour ne pas dire du biologisme", E. Balibar, "L'enjeu du nominalisme", in workshop., *Michel Foucault philosophe - Rencontres internationale Paris 9, 10, 11 janvier 1988*, Paris, Seuil (coll. "Des travaux"), 1989, p.74.

<sup>69</sup> T. Negri, *Empire*, ed. Paris, Exil, 2000. For a critique of this reading, see notably J. Rancière, "Biopolitique ou politique", *Multitudes*, n°1, mars 2000, pp.88-93.

teleological orientation. On the contrary, its preliminary function forbids any determination, in the final analysis, of what is actually transformed and individualised through the game of power relations, that is to say any designation of a common measure which the different historical configurations could result in. To be more precise, one could say that this mention of “the body” plays two distinct roles: it has to make any historical definition of the body appear as singular and also bring to light its problematic dimension.

1) *Singularisation*. As we have said, what is at stake in Foucault’s genealogical approach is to bring into question the progressive vision of political modernity, by relating the history of its legal and institutional forms to the succession of the various techniques involved in ensuring the mastery of the body. This attempt could however be subjected to an objection: would it not be possible, on this new terrain, to both retrace a continuity of history by establishing filiations between various techniques and reestablish the possibility of a teleological reading by noting how the modes of management of bodies have gained more and more precision and efficiency, etc.? If, for instance, the very peculiar political rationality which Foucault calls “governmentality” is born, as he claims, from a reflection undertaken in the 18<sup>th</sup> century regarding the ways in which the costs of power<sup>70</sup> could be reduced, can we not at least argue that there has been an economical improvement on this plan? After all, the notion of progress would certainly find clearer criteria in the technical domain than in the political or moral domain and there could indeed be a contradiction between Foucault’s refusal of the teleology and materialism of his approach.

It is on this point that the account of “the body” and of the unpredictable exteriority of events that traverses it finds a strategic function. The way in which Foucault several times calls for the history of the diverse epidemics of the Middle Ages and of the Classical Age is characteristic: the examination of the deserted space of

---

<sup>70</sup> M. Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique - cours au Collège de France 1978-79*, Paris, Gallimard-Le Seuil (coll. “Hautes études”), pp.29-53.

medieval leprosariums, soon reoccupied by the insane, opens the *History of Madness*<sup>71</sup>; the contrast between the ancient model and the surveillance measures invented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in order to control the plague throws light upon the disciplinary mechanisms in *Discipline and Punish*<sup>72</sup>. This duality between exclusion and discipline is itself later put into play when Foucault opposes to the plague and leprosy, smallpox as the crucible of statistical rationality and entirely new practices, predating new forms of governmentality.<sup>73</sup> Hence, at each moment, the conceptual distinctions made in order to account for the practice of power are reinvested within this history of disease. Consequently, the evolution of political techniques is thus exposed to the exterior intervention of events whose irruption challenges any attempt to produce a linear history. To turn the plague into the trigger for a series of innovations regarding the control of the body and then to turn these innovations into a paradigm which, two centuries later, major social institutions will generalise so that they become the normal circumstances of collective life, is equivalent to the implication within the history of disciplines, of what the *Order of Discourse* calls chance, continuity and materiality. It does not slip a metaphysical base under the random parameters of history, but forbids, on the contrary, the regressive movement which would lead from the continuity of history to the exhibition of its foundations and its permanent objectives. In other words, Foucault makes use of what he calls “the body” as an operator aiming to multiply the cause of each historical fact, and making singularity emerge, an operation which he calls “eventalising”.<sup>74</sup>

2) *Problematization*. We would, however, reduce the scope of Foucault to limit his concern with the body to the effects he induces in the objective consideration of history. The fact that the events emerge from the “heterogeneous” in the literal

---

<sup>71</sup> *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, pp.13-16.

<sup>72</sup> *Surveiller et Punir*, pp.197-201.

<sup>73</sup> M. Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population - cours au Collège de France 1977-78*, Paris, Gallimard-Le Seuil (coll. “Hautes études”), 2004 pp.11-13.

<sup>74</sup> On “the eventalization” as “causal multiplication”, see “Table ronde du 20 mai 1978”, *Dits et écrits*, T.IV, pp.23-25.

sense of the term (i.e. what emerges within difference and diversity<sup>75</sup>) is doubtlessly what the genealogist needs to bear in mind if he wants to avoid, after the dissolution of the idealities of “sex” or of “reason”, betraying his nominalism by turning the body into a new absolute. But it is also without doubt the ethical point of view which he forces himself to observe, as it needs to be preserved, defended and affirmed against any claim to definitively determine the body. “The body and pleasure”, which Foucault turns into “the basis for the counter-attack” in *The Will to Knowledge* (itself being the point from which we started) can certainly not play the role of a principle, for their evocation remains deliberately undetermined. Instead they are charged with reminding us of the precarious, contestable and potentially violent nature of every true characterisation of the body by making us value what exceeds and disturbs it.

This critical role is particularly prevalent in the narrative which Foucault advances concerning the case of Herculine Barbin, a hermaphrodite brought up in an almost exclusively feminine environment before being forced to change her legal sex, an event which would lead her to suicide. The whole analysis that he proposes of Herculine’s written memoirs is traversed, in effect, by an opposition between sexual difference, the guarantee of self-identity to which Herculine is assigned, and the experience of corporeal differences (as per the memoir she writes) which were permitted life within a mono-sexual community.

Most of the time, those who tell of their sex change belong to a strongly bisexual world. The uneasiness of their identity is expressed by the desire to pass to the other side (...). Here, the intense mono-sexuality of religious and scholarly life serves as revelation of the tender pleasures which reveal and provoke the sexual non-identity when it gets lost in the middle of all the similar bodies.<sup>76</sup>

We see the role that the reference to monosexual communities plays here: not one of a model to be defended but one of a “point of problematisation ” with respect to

---

<sup>75</sup> “P. Loraux, “Le souci de l’hétérogène”, in workshop, *Au risque de Foucault*, Paris, ed. Centre Geroges Pompidou, 1997, pp.31-39.

<sup>76</sup> “La plupart du temps, ceux qui racontent leur changement de sexe appartiennent à un monde fortement bisexuel ; le malaise de leur identité se traduit par le désir de passer de l’autre côté (...). Ici, l’intense monosexualité de la vie religieuse et scolaire sert de révélateur aux tendres plaisirs que découvre et provoque la non-identité sexuelle, quand elle s’égare au milieu de tous ces corps semblables”, “Le vrai sexe”, *Dits et Ecrits*, T.IV, p.121.



the claim of turning sexual difference into the sole truth of the individual body and its identity. It is significant, by the way, that Foucault finds the traces of this experience not directly, but through a text reporting afterwards what it took for someone to renounce it: far from staging it in a Rousseau-esque way, bodies frolicking freely about in order to denounce the way in which power oppresses them and shuts them down, Foucault only detects the former through the latter like its shadow or its scruple. Everything happens as if (to parody Kant) the medical, legal and normative definition of the body was the “ratio cognoscendi” of a multiplicity of bodies older than itself, a multiplicity thus forbidding the consideration of the diverse versions of modern individuality as obvious, satisfying and definitive. It is there for all to see that through this incitement to not forget “the body”, there emerges an empty incarnation (overwhelming the definition of all possible objectification) and an irresponsible dream (so ignorant of the suffering of others that the body resists every identification, taking an ethical figure as a young and desperate hermaphrodite). It seems, however, important to indicate here the distance between the forms of social or discursive ordering of the body and the disorder which resists them: as a reminder to not neglect what gravely envelops the gesture of restoring plurality back to unity.