

Foucault's Critique of the Liberal Individual

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FOUCAULT'S CRITIQUE OF  
THE LIBERAL INDIVIDUAL\*

IF liberalism, as a convenient abstraction, is political thinking that seeks to establish political values, structures, and institutions by discovering—not assigning—an inherent priority and privilege to pre-existing individual human beings and their spontaneous, self-directed activity, then Michel Foucault's investigations into the rationalities by which we have recently constituted ourselves as historical individuals seriously challenge the presumptuous arrogance with which liberalism continues to present itself as the theoretical basis for progressive social criticism and resistance to totalizing trends. If Foucault's insights are valid, liberalism's flaw is not that it has been inefficacious in pressing its agenda on behalf of individuals against modern tendencies that repress individuality and obstruct its potential, but that its rhetoric and its practices are themselves tragically and completely implicated in the burdensome network in which we find ourselves. His observations on the intertwinement of liberalism's individuality with its apparent opposite suggest that the current task for thinking and for action is not yet another attempted revivification and return to the individual, but instead is the rejection of, and resistance to, the individualities that we are, one crucial element of which is liberalism's programs and rhetoric.

Widespread individuality is a fairly recent idea and phenomenon. According to Foucault's analyses, the character of individuality did undergo a sharp, eruptive change at about the point in time which liberalism nostalgically recalls as its genesis, but this evolution is not the difference that liberalism's history expects.<sup>1</sup> By both accounts, the dominant history of liberalism and Foucault's countermemory, the distinctive sovereignty of the monarchical individual passed away; but they diverge on its replacement. For Foucault, there existed until the eighteenth century a formation of power in which only a few, those at the apex of formal, explicit structures, truly were individuals: the monarch was individuality's archetype, and individuality was greatest at the top of the political pyramid. Individuality was a rare opportunity and a privilege, a position of honor occupied

\* To be presented in an APA symposium on the Thought of Michel Foucault, December 30. Judith Butler and Ladelle McWhorter will be co-symposiasts; see this JOURNAL, this issue, 601–607 and 608–614, respectively, for their contributions.

<sup>1</sup> This paper will draw primarily and heavily from Foucault's most extended analysis of the constitution of the modern forms of individuality, *Discipline and Punish*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

fully by the king and derivatively by his minions. The power of this style of individuality was exercised intermittently but with unignorable force; it was the occasional outburst of a lightning flash that seared its way into the undifferentiated multitude. This power had only one direction: it radiated from a focus. The writing associated with this individuality was the chronicles of monumental deeds and blood heritages which generated and preserved its distinctiveness from the mass. Its architecture was massive monoliths of force and impenetrability: the striking palace, the threatening dungeon, the inspiring cathedral. This power, in all its forms and symbols, supported and served pre-existing individuality; individuality was its cause and originating agent.

Liberalism would end this style of individuality by extending it, substituting for its infrequency its universality, melioristically replacing the arbitrariness of monarchical abuses and potential abuses with faith in the reason of each person. Rather than a single sun, which no matter how brilliant cannot light up the entirety of the social landscape, there would be an infinity of suns, illuminating every corner, so that decision and action would have no dark side, no obscurity or secrecy. Liberalism's project would not be to dissolve this form of social power, but to disperse it, to intensify it and its potential by granting each human being the status of individuality. It would make everyone a king.

Foucault's investigations into discourses, practices, and institutions from the late eighteenth century on do not, however, find liberalism's theoretical and prescriptive promise fulfilled in mundane reality. The dominant individuality from this epoch forward is not a spreading enfranchisement of the many into the previous style of the individuality of sovereignty, but is instead its inversion and alternation in every dimension. Contrary to liberalism's rhetoric of expanding the prerogatives and efficacy of the individual, this new individuality is liberalism's dark backside. It is clearly discontinuous with the dominant individuality that preceded it and unprecedented in its particular forms, but it does have its own ancestry, with roots that can be traced in the pastoral, governmental, and police mentalities of governing.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the style of ruling connected with sovereign individuality, which intervenes in the polity irregularly so that it maintains its power merely by the threat of its actions, the pastoral,

<sup>2</sup> For Foucault's analyses of the pastoral, the governmental, and the police, see "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason'," *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Vol. II*, Sterling M. McMurrin, ed. (Salt Lake City: Utah UP, 1981), pp. 223–254; and "Governmentality," *Ideology and Consciousness*, VI (Autumn 1979): 5–21.

governmental, and police modalities of ruling insist upon constant intervention and sustenance within the political body. Sovereign individuality holds its individuality in reserve, saving its strength for the explosive actions that then prevent that which it will not tolerate; its mode is repressive, through the capacity to extinguish the life of those who will never become individuals. The new form of individuality does not, however, threaten constantly, if quietly, to erupt to repress or erase life; it instead nurtures life by its continuous involvement in the details of society—it is positive and productive. It aims at making and encouraging life; its model is the good shepherd who will not forget a single sheep. This increase of life is achieved through mechanisms of individuation; it makes use of detailed knowledge of each individual and of the aggregate information collected through knowing individuals. Individuals are constituted in being known as individuals.

Every aspect of the old individuality is reversed. The chronicle of monumental deeds is replaced by the dossiers of the minutest behaviors of particular school children, patients, soldiers, criminals, inmates—written records which follow their lives and define them as individuals, which make them the individuals that they are, which make them individuals. The architecture of imposing external structures is exchanged for a problematization of useful internal spaces; buildings are no longer to strike awe so that the bulk of the population is held below the threshold of individuality. Instead, light, lines of sight, partitioning, and visibility are carefully calculated so that they may construct individuals; transfixed in the glare of radial visibility and lateral isolation, human beings have no choice but to become individuals in institutions and practices from the army to factories to schools to hospitals to reformatories, even to panoptically utopian prisons. Individuality is no longer an opportunity that lags as the political reforms of liberalism take their time to become effective; it is an imposed, inescapable necessity, a forced and enforced requirement. Attaining individuality is not graduating to a subjectivity that would exercise autonomy and spontaneity; in the institutions, discourses, and practices of the human sciences, individuals are constituted as the particular objects that have a dynamic of subjectivity. They are built so that they must be constantly in search of themselves and, ironically enough, so that they perpetually fail the criteria set for them and thus need ceaseless effort and re-examination, re-immersion in that which forms them.

The nexus and operations of power are also turned inside out; power is no longer the sovereign spasm that expends itself against its undifferentiated object and then is reflected back to show the superi-

ority of its individuality. Instead, power intensifies and reduplicates itself as it circulates endlessly through the nodes of its network. These points of articulation are the individuals formed in this network; as this power multiplies itself, these individuals are more and more clearly defined. Individuality becomes less an agential locus of origination than this power's vehicles, its instruments and means, the sites at which it is entrenched. This individuality is a product, an effect, not potential waiting to be emancipated. Punishment, for example, becomes correction, no longer exclusion or erasure, but irresistible inclusion and refinement of a new individuality. Individuality is greatest at the base of the social pyramid.

This power operates on individuals through measurement and observation without respite. It establishes mechanisms of unhesitating surveillance with pervasive standards of normality, so that each movement of every body is recorded, graded, and adjusted. It does not so much wear down its bodies into conformity as it elicits from them automatic and perfectly identical and repeatable actions. Whether in the context of working, learning, soldiering, or rehabilitating oneself, responses and individuals become homogeneous and interchangeable. Through examination and drilling, bodies and the souls which have been appended to them become docile: paradoxically, at the same time that their power and effectiveness has been enhanced, they have been made obedient and unhesitatingly responsive, stripped of the capacity to be resistant by the manner in which they have been formed. They are the results and the possibilities of what Foucault calls the disciplinary apparatus.<sup>3</sup> The unit of social analysis is no longer the population as a single bulk entity—the wholesale control of the population—but the population as infinite aggregation—the retail management of bodies.

Ironically, according to Foucault's analyses, the individuals of discipline are not simply the warped, corrupted perversions into which the promise of liberalism has degenerated. Instead, the lineage of the disciplinary firmly precedes the programmatic ideology of liberalism. In fact, Foucault<sup>4</sup> understands liberalism as primarily reactive, not prospective. It was generated as a hesitating reply to the burgeoning

<sup>3</sup> For Foucault, the disciplinary is an analytical shorthand, a style or tendency of a form of power: although its practices do tend to coalesce into certain patterns, this is an emergent similarity, not an imposed univocity. It is not at all the product of any identifiable subjective intention, even that of history or class strategies. It is disparate but mutually supportive responses to differing local needs and conditions. Cf. *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 26/7, 138/9, 159, 224.

<sup>4</sup> "Foucault at the Collège de France II," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, VIII (1981): 349–359.

growth of the governmental and police mentalities, which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took as axiomatic the endless expansion of government and its eventually pervasive infiltration into every sphere of human life for the sake of increasing life and the strength of the state. Liberalism was conceived, according to Foucault, as a theoretical stopgap to this administrative, informational, and manipulative steamroller, which had as its instruments, not only formal arms of governmental entities and agencies, but also such tools as private benevolent associations and professional organizations. Liberalism sought to limit the scope and the intrusiveness of the formal political state, marking off economic and private realms that would be immune from its invasions. Foucault's analyses decline to emphasize grand schemes and proclamations, to follow liberalism into the theoretical preserve that valorizes the individual as a politico-ontological privilege of the true kernel of humanity which stands behind and outside all social and political practices as the ultimate point of resistance to their hegemony. Instead, Foucault's emphasis on operative practices and discourses, the mundane historical reality of the individuals that have been our social products and effects, parodies by contrast and juxtaposition the serenity of that theoretical myopia with produced effects rather than theoretical desiderata. The irony of our recent individualities is the massive machinery of disciplinary individualities which almost silently flourished in the shadow of liberalism's vocal demands for liberty and autonomous individualism.

The harsher irony is not just that the prospective promise of liberalism's hopes for the individual were diverted into grotesquely opposite caricatures, but that liberalism itself is thoroughly entangled in that which vitiates it and renders it effectively irrelevant. Liberalism is not merely frustrated by the disciplinary apparatus of individualities alongside it; it quiescently participates in its own demise, thoroughly co-opted by their peaceful coexistence. The profound rights for individuals which were secured by great political documents and legal traditions were made insignificant by the complacent dependence of these formal institutions and processes on the expertise of the human sciences that legitimize the disciplines. This is most apparent in the decisions of a judicial system, which although formally radically insistent on the rights of the juridical individual, completely relies on, and defers to, the judgments made about individuals who have previously been made in the disciplinary archipelago or who are about to be made in it. The beautifully illuminated façade of liberal justice rests discreetly upon the obscured foundation of disciplinary machinations; the hard-won system of legal rights

and procedures for the juridical individual rides epiphenomenally on quieter, but more effective processes. By determining which cases enter the formal judicial channels and which are diverted to other dispositions, and by taking control of the length and style of punishment/treatment, the human sciences displace the significance of a judicial system that merely permits and ratifies. Liberalism's ideological game of society as the fair but difficult coordination of human monads into an effective but limited contract continues to dominate political discussion, but its expression is shadowed and rendered vacuous by the corporal technologies of discipline. The theoretical discourse of punishment, for example, remains at the level and presupposition of the contract: How is punishment to expel autochthonous individuals from the contract, rehabilitate them, and then restore them to the contract while still respecting their capacity for autonomy and independence? In fact, however, the institutions of punishment took a different direction—a problem not of justification but of efficiency: How are bodies and behaviors automatically to be formed and *reformed* into obedience?<sup>5</sup> The political issue becomes a social problem. In punishment, the clean system of liberalism depends on and uses dirtier disciplinary mechanisms; the ideal relies on more thorough techniques. The intensification of economic processes which marks the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is also more compatible with the disciplinary individuality on which it depends than with the liberal individuality whose pretenses it supports and makes possible. Egalitarian concerns and liberalism's worries about such theoretical issues as property give way to the needs of the productive system's need for useful, efficiently laboring bodies. We have two models of utopia, two narratives, the first of which we like to recall, the second we conveniently forget. The first is the political myth of the state of nature and the contract that corrects its decline. This generates the bourgeoisie code of liberty, rights, and representative regimes. The second is the military and medical dream of comprehensive management, so that everything is included and utilized, so that nothing escapes (*ibid.*, pp. 146, 169). "The 'Enlightenment', which *discovered* the liberties, also *invented* the disciplines" (*ibid.*, p. 222).<sup>6</sup>

The individual as invoked by liberalism, therefore, is not an analytic fulcrum for critical and resistant thinking, but is instead, by its masking function that pretends that there is effectiveness to the

<sup>5</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 128/9.

<sup>6</sup> Even in its Roman inspirations, liberalism had this dualistic ambiguity, admiring both the citizen and the legion (*ibid.*, p. 146).

liberal ideology, a pervasively compliant ideological element in the contemporary reality of individuality which we might well find intolerable. Despite its constant and vociferous protestations, it is serenely drawn into the influence of its negation. In our recent history, criticism in the name of the liberal against the disciplinary has consistently been swept, in its practical efforts, back once more into submission before the disciplinary. They are intractable partners in our present. Rigorous critical thinking, then, would not attempt once more to revitalize that which has repeatedly failed to be revitalized: the prison is a prime example in which a combination of the values of liberalism and the practices of the human sciences have failed to recover and enable the liberal persona supposedly buried beneath unfortunate personal and social circumstances, and have instead honed a fractured, recidivist, criminal individual to be managed. The dynamic that is this repeated failure is itself a component in the individualities that we make ourselves, continuously in need of more disciplinary and human sciences' attention for the sake of our liberal potential. Rather than fight again and again to preserve the dismal, futile hope of our liberal individuality, transgressive thinking would renounce our liberal individuality, declining to be caught in its vortex. Constantly interrogating the rhetoric of individuality with the practices of individuation with which it is complicitous, it would lightly suspend our habit of commitment to this language in the face of the mocking effects and products associated with it. Tracing the elusive, fragmentary connections between the rhetoric and its reality, it would exhaust the force of any claim that we must maintain our respect for our liberal individuality, if we are to hold our respect for ourselves; it would generate a calculated indifference that breaks the spell of the liberal over us, so that we would be less likely to slide immediately and expectantly back into its demands. We would exit our liberal individuality, not by simply transcending or rejecting it, but by working through it; within it but not casually partaking of it, we might break its seductive temptations. For once, we would experience, not an emancipation and actualization *of* our individuality, but an emancipation *from* our individuality.

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