Capitalism as a Historical Agent

Karl Marx famously wrote, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it jut as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."[1] In Michel Foucault's history of "the disciplines" in European culture from roughly the 17th through 19th centuries,[2] people are accordingly rarely shown as historical agents. Rather, the disciplines take a slow but steady hold over almost every aspect of life. If people are not primary historical agents in this case, however, what is? Capitalism, although mentioned by name only occasionally, appears to be this historical agent. In this paper, I will examine some of the points in Foucault's analysis where the development of capitalism is a driving force for change; I will compare Foucault's model of change with that used by William Cronon in *Nature's Metropolis*;[3] and finally, I will suggest the need to examine in more detail how exactly capitalism came to be such a powerful non-human historical agent.

In this essay I am particularly concerned with Part Three of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, "Discipline." The three chapters in this section examine the historical development of what Foucault calls "the disciplines"—the cultural norms and ideas that have come to govern many aspects of our everyday lives, such as individuality, personal discipline, segmented time and space, etc. "Docile Bodies" explores how this process began as a mapping of social control directly onto the individual body. Foucault writes, "The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and

[1] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963), 15.
[2] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977), trans. Alan Sheridan.
[3] William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991).

rearranges it;" the disciplines "were always meticulous, often minute, techniques . . . they defined a certain mode of detailed political investment of the body, a 'new micro-physics' of power."[4] The disciplines accomplished this in several ways, two of which are most important. First, the way that individuals were distributed in space was increasingly controlled. Foucault defines several techniques that were used, including enclosure, partitioning, the coding of space in functional terms, and the increased classification of one's place in society so as to make individuals interchangeable. A second technique of the disciplines was time discipline. Time-tables were inherited from medieval monasticism, but spread quickly from the 17th century onward. In addition to this partitioning of time according to appropriate activities, time was also disciplined through the control of individual activities, such that a process was broken down into its smallest possible components.

While Foucault never states explicitly that capitalism is the primary historical force driving the development of the disciplines, the importance of these disciplines to the development of modern industrial capitalism is apparent. The "mechanics of power" that produced "docile bodies" "defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines." This is then linked to economic exploitation: "If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labour, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination."[5]

[4] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138, 139.
[5] Ibid., 138.

The various forms of the time-table are more obviously useful to capitalism through the principle of exhaustive use, as "wasting" time became forbidden: "the time-table was to eliminate the danger of wasting it—a moral offence and economic dishonesty."[6] The time-table and its various manifestations were thus an answer to the question, "How can one capitalize the time of individuals, accumulate it in each of them, in their bodies, in their forces or in their abilities, in a way that is susceptible of use and control? How can one organize profitable durations?"[7] With the commodification of time, every second of the day in which an employee was not engaged either in productive work or the various necessary activities to sustain life and increase the laboring population was conceived of as an offense against the capitalist, whose right to transform capital into material wealth was hindered.

Once people had figured out how to use the disciplines to produce docile bodies that could be controlled and manipulated, a means of training future generations was necessary to ensure the continued functioning of the disciplines in the service of the powerful (who were increasingly capitalists). Thus, training (whether in the form of education or initiation into the workplace) was increasingly routinized and discipline was kept through mechanisms of surveillance, or more generally, "means of general visibility."[8] The process of routinization was especially pronounced in schools and factories. In schools, teaching functions were increasingly divided up between several different types of instructors, each of whom, in addition to surveilling their charges, were also responsible for surveilling each other. Similarly, in the factory the division of labor became ever more pronounced as production process became more complex. Therefore,

[6] Ibid., 154.
[7] Ibid., 157.
[8] Ibid., 171.

supervision "became a special function, which had nevertheless to form an integral part of the production process, to run parallel to it throughout its entire length."[9]

Eventually the search for the perfect means of both training and surveillance were resolved in the invention of the Panopticon, an architectural form designed explicitly to instill personal discipline in supposed social deviants through the fear of constantly being watched. In the Panopticon, every inmate would be separated from every other inmate by cell walls. These cells were arranged in circular fashion around an interior courtyard, at the center of which was an observation tower. The trick to the Panopticon, however, was that the watchtower was designed so that inmates never knew whether or not they were being watched at a particular moment. The fear of being watched (and the resulting punishment, should they misbehave), however, would theoretically keep them in line at all times. The ability of the Panopticon to work was predicated upon a concept of individuality (*I* may be watched, therefore *I* may be punished) at the same time that it instilled values of personal discipline into its inmates. Thus, while originally developed as a design for prisons, panoptic design elements were quickly incorporated into other public places such as schools, factories and hospitals, as well, so that all members of society may be trained to be docile bodies.

Throughout this analysis capitalism is a driving force for the implementation and growth of the disciplines. Foucault asserts that the development of the disciplines corresponds to the historical conjuncture of the "large demographic thrust of the eighteenth century" and "the growth in the apparatus of production, which was becoming more and more extended and complex; it was also becoming more costly and its

[9] Ibid., 174.

profitability had to be increased."[10] In fact, these two processes became inextricably intertwined: "It would not have been possible to solve the problem of the accumulation of men without the growth of an apparatus of production capable of both sustaining them and using them; conversely, the techniques that made the cumulative multiplicity of men useful accelerated the accumulation of capital." Thus, "the growth of a capitalist economy gave rise to the specific modality of disciplinary power, whose general formulas, techniques of submitting forces and bodies, in short, 'political anatomy,' could be operated in the most diverse political régimes, apparatuses or institutions."[11]

While William Cronon's examination of the relationship between Chicago and its "hinterland," and thus between urban and rural contexts, in the development of the interior of the continental United States is less theoretical and more historically specific than Foucault's work, nevertheless here too capitalism seems to stand in as the historical agent responsible for driving change in a particular trajectory. A brief review of Cronon's narrative will suffice four my purposes. Despite the fact that Chicago was one of a number of "least bad" places for a commercial metropolis to develop that would link the Eastern states with the developing American hinterland, it somehow came out on top of all the others (for at least a little while). The primary reason for this was a rather felicitous location as a midpoint between the East Coast and the American "frontier" during the second half of the 19th century, precisely the time when railroads were expanding across the continent. Thus, Chicago was successful in attracting all of the major railroad lines in either direction. At the same time, railroad shipping was revolutionizing commercial activity in the U.S., as products such as wheat, lumber and

[10] Ibid., 218.
[11] Ibid., 221.

meat were able to be marketed farther and farther away from their point of production. The capitalist imperative of maximization of surplus merely cemented the importance of the railroads in the commercial life of the U.S. Since (nearly) all major railroads ran through Chicago, it "naturally" became the commercial capital of the American mid-continent as it tied together various isolated communities in the West and connected them all to the wider world of the East.

In the analyses of both Foucault and Cronon, individuals rarely appear as agents. Rather, people act in ways that are consonant with capitalist imperatives of growth, expansion and maximization. Whether this was their intention or not, both Cronon and Foucault portray capitalism as an impersonal historical force that sweeps people up in its path; even if it is possible for individuals to resist it, so few actually manage to do so that the progress of the capitalist world system can continue unabated even in the face of such resistance (as evidenced by Cronon's small-town butchers and their futile resistance to the expansion of frozen, packed meats). Such a conception of capitalism, however, is ahistorical: although the developmental process of the capitalist world system is described in detail, no attention is given to the original development of capitalism as an entity, economic system or worldview. Was it, in its first instance, just as impersonal as it has come to be, the accidental (or fortuitous) result of a specific historical conjunction, or were there human actors instrumental in developing and implementing it? Foucault's subtitle, "The Birth of the Prison," suggests that one of the purposes of his project is to elucidate the origins of the modern penal system—presumably so that we may reform it and do away with its inhumane aspects. Similarly, if we are to understand modern capitalism for the purposes of reforming its negative impacts on people's lives (a project

with which I believe both Foucault and Cronon would agree), we must understand its origins. Only by piercing the ideology of the timelessness and inevitability of the capitalism system will we be able to escape Marx's somewhat pessimistic evaluation of human agency at a time when such an escape is more urgent than ever.