

Michel Foucault,
- Power - : Essential Works
of Foucault 1954-1984

WHAT IS CALLED "PUNISHING"??*

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Q: Your book *Discipline and Punish*, published in 1974, fell like a meteorite on the terrain of the penal specialists and criminologists. Presenting an analysis of the penal system which focused on political tactics and the technology of power, that work upset the established ideas concerning delinquency and the social function of punishment. It disturbed the penal judges, at least those who reflected on the meaning of their work; it vexed a number of criminologists who were hardly pleased, moreover, to see their discourse called "chatter." Nowadays, criminology books that don't refer to *Discipline and Punish* as a work to be reckoned with are more and more rare. Yet the penal system doesn't change, and the criminological chatter goes on as before. It's as if people were paying homage to the theorist of juridico-penal epistemology without being able to make any use of his teaching, as if a complete imperviousness existed between theory and practice. Of course, it wasn't your intention to do the work of a reformer, but couldn't one imagine a criminal justice policy that would take support from your analyses and would try to draw certain lessons from them?

A: Perhaps I should start by explaining what I intended to do in that book. I didn't aim to do a work of criticism, at least not directly, if what is meant by criticism in this case is denunciation of the negative aspects of the current penal system. And I didn't aim to do the sort of job that a historian of institutions might do, either, in the sense that I didn't mean to recount how the penal and carceral institution had functioned in the course of the nineteenth century.

What is Called "Punishing"?

383

I attempted to define another problem. I wanted to uncover the system of thought, the form of rationality that, since the end of the eighteenth century, has supported the notion that prison is really the best means, or one of the most effective and rational means, of punishing offenses in a society. It's quite obvious that in doing this I had certain ideas concerning what was possible at the present time. Indeed, it has often appeared to me that by setting reformism against revolution, as is usually done, one doesn't provide oneself with the means for imagining what might bring about a real, profound, and radical transformation. It seems to me that when it was a question of reforming the penal system the reformers very often accepted, implicitly and sometimes even explicitly, the system of rationality that had been defined and put in place long before, and that they were simply trying to discover what the institutions and practices might be that would enable them to realize that system's scheme and achieve its ends. In bringing out the system of rationality underlying punitive practices, I wanted to indicate what the postulates of thought were that needed to be reexamined if one intended to transform the penal system. I'm not saying that they would necessarily have to be discarded; but I think that when one engages in a project of transformation and renovation, it's very important to know not only what the institutions and their real effects are, but also what type of thought sustains them: What elements of that system of rationality can still be accepted? What is the part, on the other hand, that deserves to be cast aside, abandoned, transformed, and so on? It's the same thing that I had tried to do with respect to the history of psychiatric institutions. It's true that I was a bit surprised, and fairly disappointed, to see that all this didn't lead to any endeavor of reflection and thought that might have brought people together around the same problem—very different people such as magistrates, penal law theorists, penitentiary practitioners, lawyers, social workers, and persons who have experienced prison. It's true that, for cultural or social reasons no doubt, the seventies were extremely disappointing in that regard. Many critiques were leveled more or less in every direction. Often, these ideas had a certain dissemination, and at times they exerted a certain influence; but the questions that were raised rarely crystallized into a collective initiative to determine in any case what transformations would need to be carried out. At any rate, for my part and

