WELCOME TO THE PRISON OF MODERNITY
FOUCAULT'S THEORY OF DISCIPLINARY POWER AND ITS LIMITS

Power is one of the most controversial concepts in modern political theories. Whereas liberal thinkers assert the existence of neutral institutions and deliberative consensus based on communicative rationality others claim the omnipresence of power structures and the exclusion of other forms of life.

Einführung: David Schkade

The more familiar a word seems at first, the more difficulties it often raises when one attempts to define it accurately. Such is the case with the word *power*. What is power? In "Surveiller et punir – Naissance de la prison" (English translation "Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison) Michel Foucault furnishes a fresh and unique account of this contested question. Following the Machiavellian tradition of exposing the mechanisms of power, Foucault undermines the common subject-centered conceptions of power with his historic-genealogical account. The critical examination of Foucault's conception of power as it is presented in the chapter "Le panoptisme" can aid us in developing a better understanding of the question of what power is in modernity as we know it. It is a general introduction to a fundamental concept of social science.

DISCIPLINARY POWER: THE PANOPTICON …

Published in 1975, "Surveiller et punir" marks an extension in Foucault's œuvre. In it he applies genealogical analysis in order to evaluate the "causes of the transition from one way of thinking to another" (Gutting 2003). The underlying question is this: What are the causes for the changes in the penal systems from the most brutal public torture imaginable to its disappearance and the rise of other, "humanized" forms of penalty? Foucault is successful in illustrating the existence of a sharp contrast between the different penal styles due to the effective presentation of the historical sources used in the first chapter, "Le corps des condamnés".

Foucault structures his argumentation around a working hypothesis that explains the transition from one penal system to another, as resulting from the invention and rise of a new form of power. This is analyzed in the chapter "Le panoptisme". Foucault identifies two historical precursors of that new form of power in the

measures to be taken in a 17th century plague-stricken town and the confinement of the leper, both embodying what he calls "pouvoir disciplinaire". Foucault considers two functions of disciplinary power as essential: "that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal); and that of coercive assignment, of differential distribution (who he is; where he must be; how he is to be characterized; how he is to be recognized; how a constant surveillance is to be exercised over him in an individual way, etc.)" (Foucault 1991: 199). For analytical reasons it is appropriate to shift the focus of Foucault's analysis of power to its ideal model, which is found in its purest form in Jeremy Bentham's idea of the panopticon.

The panopticon is an architectural configuration in which individuals are separated from each other and completely visible from a central watchtower. The individuals cannot verify if they are actually watched at any particular moment, but they certainly know that they could be. The major effect of this configuration is perfidious: "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 1991: 201). The automatic functioning of power inherent to the panoptic machine renders even the guardians unnecessary because the monitored individuals are playing the role of the guardians themselves. Thus, costs for power are decreased to its minimum, whereas efficiency is increased to its maximum.

Moreover, the panopticon can be used as a laboratory. It is the ideal configuration for experimentation, allowing for the identification and classification of difference, and conveying the ability "to train or correct individuals" (Foucault 1991: 203). This is possible because it performs both disciplinary power functions to be exercised in the aforementioned plague-stricken town. Foucault also stresses the polyvalent applicability of the panoptic power machine: "Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a

A panoptic powerstructure [Foto: marqs / photocase.com]

of disciplinary power and knowledge in a "circular process" (Foucault 1991: 224) during the 18th century. The quintessence of these theories is that we are currently the products of disciplinary power and prisoners in a diffused variant of the panopticon, controlled by experts in normalization and *les flics* – the cops.

THE LIMITS OF FOUCAULT'S DISCIPLINARY POWER

Bentham invented and described the panopticon as the ideal technology for the institution of power. Foucault rediscovered this idea and researched to what extent the Benthamite dream has become reality after two hundred years. Furthermore, he connected this analysis with the task of explaining certain styles of punishment.

Generally, Foucault's arguments seem to be affected by a materialistic account because it is material configurations which shape individuals. The role of ideas, creativity and free decisions of individuals are not considered. Foucault's implicit idea of a human seems to be that of a weak creature resembling a tabula rasa shaped only by power. In this respect, the enlightenment notion of autonomy can at best be regarded as the result of disciplinary mechanisms. But was there really a disciplinary mechanism that gave, for example, Socrates the autonomy to philosophize and even to decide to drink the cup of hemlock, though he was not created by disciplinary mechanisms of a panoptic style? And even in the panoptic age, there is the phenomenon of deviance. No matter how interesting Foucault's approach is, it can certainly not indisputably refute the possibility of free decisions made by man autonomously. Examples of a non-depraved, good life in autonomy can be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophical life of the *promeneur solitaire* living at the margin of society, the *loving* and the life of the *citoyen* in a virtuous republic (Meier 2001: LXXVI).

FOUCAULT'S THEORY OF DISCIPLINARY POWER IN COMPARISON

Foucault's theory does not neglect other theories of power, but rather claims they are insufficient and indecisive. The elite theorists' and behaviorists' concepts maintaining the classical notion of power as the capac-

ity of a person or a group leading to observable results or actions may be correct although it highlights only relatively unimportant phenomena of power. Those conceptions which conceive of power as the capacity of a group to set a specific agenda in which "dangerous" issues are excluded, suffer from the same flaw (Bachrach/Baratz 1962: 947). Nor are descriptions of power as the capacity of an élite to influence the interests of the population by ideologies neglected by Foucault, rather, he goes one step further in claiming that not only the will of the individuals but the individuals "an und für sich", i.e. in the totality of their existence, are shaped by power. Thus, Foucault's conception of disciplinary power sheds light on the faults of previously existing theories of power.

OMNIPRESENT POWER STRUCTURES?

So what can we learn from Foucault with regard to the question of power? The perfect power finding its ideal form in the Benthamite panopticon was established through a historical process at the very foundations of the modern *société disciplinaire* we are currently living in. Rousseau's *Contrat Social* with its sovereign and its according conception of power only plays a minor part in the theatre of modernity

A place of creation [Foto:Nick Großmann]

task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic scheme may be used" (Foucault 1991: 205). Foucault's primary examples of panoptic power relations are prisons, factories, schools, barracks, and hospitals. The democratically controlled watch-tower aims not at a negative disciplinary power, but exists in order "to strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply" (Foucault 1991: 208).

…WE ARE LIVING IN

Foucault describes three transformations related to disciplinary power, affecting today's society, all of which

he substantiates by exemplary historical sources. One of these distortions is a functional inversion which he argues has taken place. Panoptic power has only been perceived as negative although it produces skillful and useful individuals in disciplinary society. The second process Foucault describes is the deinstitutionalization of the panopticon, whose mechanisms can now be found in our "free states". The third transformation Foucault describes is an infiltration of the apparatus of states, such as the police, by disciplinary power mechanisms. These processes took place within three broad historical developments which Foucault describes first as power linking economic and demographic growth in the 18th century, then as disciplinary power stabilizing bourgeois dominance respectively undermining juridical equality as counter-law, and finally the increase

of which the principal performer can no longer be found in individuals but in the mighty mechanisms of power inherent to the panoptic machine. Modern humanity is merely a product of the "pouvoir" engendered by the Benthamite physics at play in the "société disciplinaire".

Concerning the questions of individual emancipation, human autonomy and the good life, Foucault's approach suffers from a normative deficit due to its overwhelming pessimism. Generally, however, Foucault has argued convincingly due to the historic sources on which he has built his arguments. Compared to other conceptions of power Foucault has introduced a radical account and so enriched the discourse of the contested concept of power with a new perspective. It would have been interesting if he had also delivered a political philosophy to regulate the question of panoptic power in a contractualist-theoretic style. Without any specific individual exercising power, however, who could be the contracting parties in an original position? In the end, the open question remains how to deal with the "pouvoir disciplinaire".

°David Schkade studiert im 6. Semester Politische Wissenschaft mit dem Nebenfach Volkswirtschaftslehre an der Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bachrach, Peter/Baratz, Morton S. (1962): Two faces of power. In: The American Political Science Review, Vol. 56, No. 4, pp. 947–952.

Foucault, Michel (1991): Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison. First published 1975. London, Penguin Books.

Gutting, Gary (2003): Michel Foucault. In: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. URL: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/#1 (13.12.2007).

Meier, Heinrich (2001): Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Diskurs über die Ungleichheit. Discours sur l'inégalité. 5th edition. München, Ferdinand Schöningh.