CHAPTER TWO

DISCIPLINARY/BIO-POWER AND RATIONAL AUTONOMY

The French Revolution is, for the most part, construed as one of the most significant socio-political events in history, on account of the way in which it drew to a close the era of monarchical rule and concomitantly ushered in the age of democracy. As such, it is generally regarded as a largely positive development that stands both as a testimony to the triumph of the human spirit over oppression, and as the historical birth moment of the ethical concerns from which contemporary humanitarianism evolved. As such, it is no surprise that, in the interest of propagating this narrative of ‘progress,’ the bloodletting that was indissociable from the French Revolution is oft en played down, either by characterizing it as an unfortunate but necessary evil, or by intimating its relative acceptability in comparison to the mass slaughter of twentieth century conflicts.

However, what Foucault thematizes in Discipline and Punish, and, for that matter, in The Will to Knowledge, is that the above perspectives involve a significant act of displacement, insofar as they effectively occult the manner in which, subsequent to the French Revolution, the exercise of power over people became exponentially more pervasive and meticulous. That is, through a retrieval from obscurity, and a reconsideration, of those documents that emerged both prior and subsequent to the French Revolution, Foucault provides a very different history of the present that is not couched in terms of any narrative of ‘progress.’ Rather, it debunks the idea of the present as a more benign and humane era, and does so by illustrating how it continues to be informed by technologies that are orientated around not only controlling ever more intimate aspects of individual existence, but also extending such control over ever greater segments of the (global) population (DP, 30–31).

Consequently, for many readers of Discipline and Punish, what is alarming is not Foucault’s opening description of the brutal public torture of the regicide Damiens, which occurred under the auspices of the ancien régime in 1757 (DP, 3). Rather, what serves as a source of growing distress is the matrix of power relations that Foucault subsequently draws into conspicuousness through the text. This is not
only because the reader rapidly becomes aware of the fact that they are being presented with a description of the long-forgotten organizational blueprint that has effectively informed almost every aspect of their subjectivity, from their most banal habits to their most expansive cosmological views. In addition, it is also because the reasons for the design and implementation of such organization, far from being self-evident, emerge as quite arbitrary. That is, they emerge as orientated not around the continual pursuit of the best of all possible worlds, so to speak, under the influence of a new and broad magnanimity, but rather around an extension of power that knows no limits whatsoever, and that derives its sustenance from the individuals it subjugates. Indeed, it would appear that, ironically, beneath the nightmarish tyranny of the scaffold, more discursive spaciousness surrounded the ordinary person than currently exists for the disciplinary subject within the modern welfare state.

The extent to which this is the case becomes apparent when one juxtaposes the age of the scaffold with the subsequent era of disciplinary power. That is, according to Foucault, in terms of the former, the discursive spaciousness that surrounded the ordinary person was afforded largely by their relative anonymity, which stood in marked contrast to the salient identity of the monarch. Understandably, such anonymity, in turn, required the sovereign’s generic roar to issue forth from and resound around the scaffold, via the spectacle of torture, in the interest of governance, because the situation was one in which the majority of people watched and then restrained themselves, in fearful recollection of how a single person had been tortured for failing to practice restraint (DP, 47–50, 57–59, 192). However, in terms of the disciplinary era, these arrangements were largely inverted. That is, while the growing bureaucracy that replaced the monarch became ever more anonymous, the previous relative anonymity of the ordinary person gave way to the increasingly particular identification of each as a disciplinary subject. Although the capacity for control that was facilitated by such highly discriminate identification obviated the need for any spectacle of torture to maintain authority, the situation was now one in which all individuals, regardless of whether or not they were guilty of any crime, became subject to ever more elaborate and chronic forms of discursive domination (DP, 7–24, 187–193).

Admittedly, as Foucault recalls, between the scaffold and disciplinary power, the semio-technique of punishment dominated for a brief