

REVIEW

Anne Schwan & Stephen Shapiro, *How to Read Foucault's Discipline and Punish* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-7453-2981-9

Schwan and Shapiro's aim is straightforward: to present a comprehensive and accessible account of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.¹ Their work may thus be thought of as a translation, one that renders the dense and difficult language of the original in clear and simple terms. Of course, the line between translation and interpretation is not a hard and fast one, the former inevitably and inexorably shading into the latter. It is along both axes, then, that *FDP* must be assessed.

As a translation, *FDP* proceeds as one would expect. Each main chapter provides a summary of a corresponding chapter in *Discipline and Punish*, and each summary follows faithfully the order of Foucault's presentation. Schwan and Shapiro state modestly that their translation is intended for those making their "first encounter" (13) with *Discipline and Punish*. Such readers will certainly benefit from *FDP*, but so too will more seasoned ones. *Discipline and Punish* is a work that must be read multiple times. Yet re-readings too often proceed along the grooves forged by earlier readings, further entrenching one's views rather than deepening them. Confronting the argument of *Discipline and Punish* in the idiom of *FDP* is one way to overcome that difficulty. Based on my experience, I am confident that Schwan and Shapiro's translation will frequently remind readers of details they had forgotten or overlooked and of passages to which they had not given due attention. Thus, like all good translations, it enhances one's appreciation of the original.

My evaluation of *FDP* as an interpretation is more mixed. In one sense it is a valuable departure from the norm. Far too many discussions of *Discipline and Punish* are governed by its enticing terminology ('genealogy,' 'power/knowledge') and compelling images (the execution of Damians, the Panopticon) at the expense of an engagement with its finer details.² The approach adopted in *FDP* provides a useful corrective to such treatments. By exploring every nook and cranny of *Discipline and Punish*, Schwan and Shapiro bring out just how intricate a work it is. Nevertheless, there are points where they fail to capture the force of Foucault's argument and others where they gloss over obscurities in it. Let me give an example of each.

(1) The opening images of *Discipline and Punish*—a contemporary description of Damians

¹ In what follows I shall refer to *How to Read Foucault's Discipline and Punish* as *FDP* and to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977) by its proper title. Page references to both works will be incorporated parenthetically within the text; those to *Discipline and Punish* will be preceded by 'DP.'

² Schwan and Shapiro seem to share this judgment (1-2).

the regicide's execution in 1757, and a prison time-table drawn up 80 years later—clearly imply that Foucault's account is structured around two historical stages and that his aim is to describe the emergence of the one ("disciplinary society") out of the other ("the society of the scaffold.")³ Schwan and Shapiro, however, hold that in Part Two of *Discipline and Punish* Foucault posits a third stage between the society of the scaffold and disciplinary society. (see 65, 96) This badly distorts the role of that section in Foucault's narrative. Part Two brings out the crisis into which the society of the scaffold had fallen and describes the projects for reform that emerged in response. The most significant feature of those projects is that they "proposed a whole panoply of penalties... which represented in their form the content of the crime." (DP, 105) Yet the goals of the reformers were never seriously pursued. The scaffold disappeared and was replaced, not by the diverse array of punishments imagined by the reformers, but instead by the prison.⁴ This transition, Foucault notes, "occurred almost instantaneously." (DP, 116) The problem Foucault sets himself for the rest of the book is to explain how this happened. (DP, 130-1) Part of what makes this problem vexing and intriguing is that, unlike the projects of the reformers, the prison was not designed as a remedy for the inadequacies of the scaffold. The crisis of the society of the scaffold thus does not point towards disciplinary society as its natural resolution. Part Two is therefore essential in expressing and arguing for Foucault's non-teleological view of history—a central feature of his thought. All of this is obscured in Schwan and Shapiro's treatment.⁵

(2) Part Three of *Discipline and Punish* presents Foucault's analysis of the disciplines. There he discusses in exacting detail the techniques whereby power is brought to bear on the "most minute and distant elements." (DP, 216) Foucault states repeatedly that the goal of disciplinary power is to produce "docile" and "useful" individuals. (DP, 211, 231, 233) It is therefore a surprise to find him reporting in Part Four that from its inception the prison was found to be a failure. Far from reducing crime, the prison produces it. (DP, 264-268) To be sure, Foucault argues that this "failure" is merely apparent and that the production of crime is ministerial to the functioning of power as it allows for the more effective management and control of populations.⁶ (DP, 276-277) However, the important point here is that its utility does not depend on rendering individuals "docile" and "useful":

The prison... is not intended to eliminate offences, but rather to distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them; that it is not so much that they render docile those who are liable to transgress the law, but that they tend to assimilate the transgression of the laws in a general tactics of subjection. (DP, 272)

This leaves us very much in the dark as to what we are to make of the efficacy of the disciplines described in Part Three. If the prison, which Foucault takes to be the paradigmatic dis-

³ 'Disciplinary society' is Foucault's term (DP, 209); 'society of the scaffold' is my coinage.

⁴ Thus the plaintive and puzzled remarks of one official: "if I have betrayed my country, I go to prison; if I have killed my father, I go to prison; every imaginable offence is punished in the same uniform way. One might as well see a physician who has the same remedy for all ills." (DP, 117)

⁵ Schwan and Shapiro tacitly concede that they have not identified a genuine stage between the scaffold and the prison when, in presenting a table that summarizes the changes in punishment Foucault depicts, they omit "the intermediary phase of punishment for the sake of emphasis." (138-139)

⁶ Part Four thus points toward Foucault's concerns in *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

ciplinary institution, fails to render individuals docile and useful, then what of the other institutions Foucault takes up such as hospitals, schools, factories and armies? Those questions themselves boil down to a more fundamental one: can one speak of a disciplinary society at all? I do not mean to suggest that Foucault has no answer, or that Schwan and Shapiro ought to have supplied him with one. Rather, my point is that in scrupulously reporting Foucault's views but failing to note when they appear to clash, *FDP* makes *Discipline and Punish* out to be a more transparent work than it is.

The previous remarks concern interpretive judgments that emerge in the course of Schwan and Shapiro's translation of *Discipline and Punish*. Other interpretive judgments emerge from their efforts to contextualize that work. Those contextualizing efforts are in part implicit and in part explicit.

Schwan and Shapiro's implicit contextualization pertains to the place of *Discipline and Punish* within Foucault's *oeuvre* as a whole. Here their approach is decidedly and happily minimalist. They focus exclusively on *Discipline and Punish*, leaving to the side Foucault's interviews, lecture courses and other published works. There is, of course, nothing intrinsically wrong with making use of such sources but the price to be paid for breadth is often depth. As I have already indicated, *FDP* is nothing if not a deep investigation of Foucault's argument. In addition, the minimalist approach has the considerable merit of being rather unique, as extended studies of individual works by Foucault are all too rare.⁷

In a prefatory chapter (1–10), Schwan and Shapiro place Foucault's work in three contexts: (1) French historical writing, (2) Marxism and (3) Foucault's activism. It is the second context that is the most important in *FDP*, and I shall therefore focus on it. Schwan and Shapiro's identification of Marxism as the proper context for understanding Foucault is surely correct, as is brought out nicely by the following reminiscence from one of his acquaintances:

On the one occasion that I met Foucault, in his immaculate white apartment in Paris in 1976, he expressed uneasiness about his works being translated into English. They were all written, he said, in opposition to the know-it-all leftism of the Communist Party, and without that framework, there was no telling what effect they might have.⁸

Opposition to orthodox Marxism is not the same as opposition to Marx, and Schwan and Shapiro rightly note that "Marx is one of the most favourably cited authorities in *Discipline and Punish*." (7) One of their primary goals in *FDP* is to establish a dialogue between the two thinkers. (8) Though the goal is a worthy one, it is more than can be achieved within the confines of a work of this sort. The reasons are obvious: a genuine dialogue requires an interpretation not

⁷ The one reservation I have here concerns the neglect of "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." That essay is as cryptic as it is crucial for understanding Foucault. Discussing the extent to which the "genealogy" (*DP*, 29–30) presented in *Discipline and Punish* illustrates the method outlined in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," would, I believe, clarify both works. On balance, though, I am inclined to think that Schwan and Shapiro's resolute commitment to minimalism is the wisest policy.

⁸ Jonathan Ree, "The Treason of the Clerics," *The Nation*, August 15, 2005. The article is a review of Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

just of Foucault but of Marx. The following will illustrate the difficulties I have in mind.

In a particularly significant passage in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses the relationship between the accumulation of capital and the accumulation of men⁹:

The two processes... cannot be separated; 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 sustaining and using them; conversely, the techniques that made the cumulative multiplicity of men useful accelerated the accumulation of capital. (221)

Schwan and Shapiro take this passage as indicating a division of labor, with Foucault analyzing the accumulation of men and Marx the accumulation of capital. (136) This may be an accurate reading of Foucault's intention, but it is misleading as an interpretation of Marx. It suggests that he would regard the accumulation of capital and the accumulation of men as two processes rather than one. However, late in *Capital* we find the following:

The reproduction of labour-power which must incessantly be re-incorporated into capital as its means of valorization, which cannot get free of capital, and whose enslavement to capital is only concealed by the variety of individual capitalists to whom it sells itself, form in fact, a factor in the reproduction of capital itself. Accumulation of capital is therefore accumulation of the proletariat.¹⁰

Thus, if Foucault's theory lends support to Marx's, it cannot be because the one discusses a process to which the other is indifferent or gives only scant attention. Yet, exploring those issues would have taken *FDP* well beyond its stated boundaries. Thus, while Schwan and Shapiro make clear just how prevalent Marxist concepts are in *Discipline and Punish*, their remarks about the significance of that fact are and must be suggestive at best.

As is clear from the above, the relatively modest aim of *FDP* (to present Foucault's argument clearly and completely) harbors within it a more ambitious one (to achieve a rapprochement between Marx and Foucault). Though most of *FDP* is devoted to the modest aim, the more ambitious one is never far from view. Even though the ambitious aim is not fully realized, *FDP* nonetheless has a trait shared by all strong interpretations in pointing beyond itself to further work. It is, as Schwan and Shapiro would have it, "a starting point, not a conclusion." (13)

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⁹ Foucault's use of 'men' is regrettable, but in order to maintain continuity with the passage I have opted to follow him.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. I* translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), 764. It bears mentioning that the chapter is very much concerned with men—as Marx puts it, with "the fate of the working class" (762)—and very little with "things."