EXPLORING REGIMES OF DISCIPLINE
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EXPLORING REGIMES OF DISCIPLINE

The Dynamics of Restraint

Edited by

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The pursuit and practice of discipline have become near ubiquitous elements of contemporary social life and parlance. From the celebrated “discipline of the market” proclaimed by neoliberal politicians to self-actualizing experiences of embodied discipline proffered by martial arts instructors, discipline has become a commonplace and even sought-after social technology or way of doing things. Yet among social scientists there remains a tendency to conceptualize discipline narrowly in terms of externalized and impersonal structures of control and punishment of the kinds associated with prisons, the military, or traditional schoolrooms.

The limitations of this approach become apparent when we seek to take account of the stylized and innovative ways in which regimes of self-discipline are being cultivated within voluntary realms of leisure and self-development, not to mention within partially autonomous and individuated venues of professional, working, and domestic life. What is more, insights acquired through the exploration of programs and activities featuring self-discipline suggest that some abiding assumptions concerning structures of externally imposed control may, in fact, tend to obscure as much or more of the workings of these ostensibly coercive disciplinary regimes than they reveal. Clearly, it is time to reexamine customary precepts and presumptions regarding the nature and dynamics of restraint fundamental to disciplinary practice. And, as this volume seeks to demonstrate, this is a task that anthropologists are especially well equipped to undertake.
Defining and Depicting Discipline

Broadly speaking, discipline may be invoked to refer to a range of overlapping activities, relationships, and outcomes. It may comprise programs of training, especially pertaining to mind and character, which aim to reproduce preferred forms of conduct. By the same token, discipline may be identified as the product or result of such training, as in the “suitably-ordered” behavior of school children or soldiers. Or discipline may be located within sets of rules established for the purpose of exercising control over people, be they prisoners, coreligionists, or fellow practitioners such as physicians or lawyers. So too may discipline be depicted in terms of the application of particular forms of punishment. Alternately, a domain of instruction, learning or knowledge may be said to constitute a discipline.

Reaching beyond these familiar dictionary definitions of discipline, academics have often turned to Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), a work that has for many years served as a principal source in the social sciences for defining and theorizing the nature and utilization of discipline in the modern world:

“Discipline” may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a “physics” or an “anatomy” of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by “specialized” institutions (the penitentiaries or “houses of correction” of the nineteenth century), or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end (schools, hospitals), or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power (215).

Part Three of *Discipline and Punish*, which specified the mechanisms by which docile bodies were to be created, how means of correct training were to be exercised, and panopticism practiced, has been widely cited, puzzled over, and reworked by succeeding generations of social and political analysts, including more than a few anthropologists.

Foucault’s depiction of the disciplinary methods that evolved during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries presented these as “general formulas of domination” (1977: 137) that differed fundamentally from slavery, vassalage, and prior disciplines of a monastic type. What he distinguished as having been generated during this historical era was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A “political anatomy”, which was also a “mechanics of power”, was being born; it 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. Thus discipline produces sub-
jected and practised bodies, “docile” bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an “aptitude”, a “capacity”, which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection. (138)

Deposited within Foucault’s rendering of discipline is an admission that it may be implemented so that they may be obliged to do what one wishes, thereby acknowledging discipline as a means of control capable of being applied by some individuals or groups to others. Nevertheless, his gaze in Discipline and Punish remained firmly focused on technological features and mechanisms, the “it” of discipline, rather than upon relationships and dealings between those who would apply discipline and those to whom it would be applied. Indeed, the disciplinary mechanisms observed and described with such evident care in Foucault’s account seem at times almost like actual machines, switched on and humming in the foreground, inconspicuously muffling any sounds from those who might in one way or another be caught up with or in the machinery of discipline. What Foucault fixed his attention upon were matters such as the advantages of hierarchical observation: “The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. A central point would be both the source of light illuminating everything, and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known: a perfect eye that nothing would escape.” (1977: 173).

Within the parameters of surveillance, panopticism, and discipline—as in the realm of the Borg, featured in the science fiction television program Star Trek—“resistance is futile.”

Detailing measures taken by town authorities to respond to outbreaks of the plague in the seventeenth century, Foucault traced how and with what effect implementation of a strict quarantine and ceaseless inspection was mounted:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an interrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead—all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overtake prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the
individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. Against the plague, which is a mixture, discipline brings into play its power, which is one of analysis. (1977: 197)

This model of the disciplinary mechanism may, one interpreter of the Foucauldian approach has suggested, represent the most despairing stage of Foucault’s decidedly pessimistic reading of the development of Western society (Ransom 1997: 19–24). Yet, for those who turn to Discipline and Punish not in order to join in a continuing archaeological excavation of Foucault’s life and thought as an end in itself, but rather as a point of departure from which to interrogate further the complex workings of discipline in the contemporary world, this boldly sketched model of the microphysics of power offers little in the way of encouragement. By repeatedly underscoring the implausibility of resistance, Discipline and Punish raises the specter of discipline as an implacable, seamless, and, in some respects, inscrutable force sui generis. Foucault’s portrayal of discipline inconspicuously assumes the posture of a complete and finished analytical undertaking that henceforth stands ready to serve as a reliable field manual for listing and spotting the indispensable features of disciplinary regimes.

The sense of certainty and preoccupation with structural arrangements characteristic of Discipline and Punish are, one might argue, fairly predictable products of Foucault’s reliance upon textual analysis rather than ethnographic research to ground his investigation. Anthropologists have been no less intrepid than other social scientists in their various endeavors to apply different aspects of Foucault’s model of discipline to a range of settings. But in seeking to employ this analytic model within fieldwork studies, anthropologists have frequently confronted and noted relationships, processes, and contradictions not recognized much, if at all, in Discipline and Punish. Indeed, the likelihood of encountering a wider range of pragmatic problems, operational inconsistencies, and analytic alternatives pertaining to discipline seems to increase significantly when one strays beyond the bounds of textual certainty through engagement in ethnographic inquiry.

Observing the Panopticon

Carla Freeman’s (1993) examination of corporate discipline in Barbados’s offshore data-processing centers reprises the functioning of the panopticon in the form of video display terminals: “[The VDT] is undoubtedly a manager’s dream come true: every employee can be electronically observed without pause or error; her productivity can be measured for specific increments or longitudinally; and she need never be engaged in face-to-face contact. The computer thus becomes a tool that not only speeds specific job tasks, but that evaluates the worker as well” (175). What Freeman also
noticed is the manner in which employees in this pink-collar sector are, however, inspected at close hand and obliged to observe a management-defined dress code while on the job. Within the arena of the office, dress and fashion may serve as powerful metaphors of corporate discipline. Yet Freeman surmises that preferred styles of dress also comprise valued forms of personal expression and pleasure for female workers (177).

Peer pressure with respect to dress and demeanor can, therefore, be understood both as contradicting and playing into the hands of corporate managers. Female workers in this industry express pride about “holding down a regular job, getting dressed up, and being ‘a working woman’” (Freeman 1993: 181). Although allowing for the possibility that this discourse might be dismissed as merely “a deception or a ploy to distract the workers from the reality of their meager wages and the limits of their jobs,” Freeman nonetheless argues that such a conclusion would “preclude a more subtle analysis of the women’s working experience and the contradictions between their ‘real’ and ‘perceived’ motivations and responses” (181). In other words, rather more seems to be unfolding within this particular disciplinary context than a conventional model of the workings of the panopticon might lead us to expect.

Paul Killworth’s (1998) ethnographic account of the internal security operations and training of the British Army in Northern Ireland similarly deploys insights drawn from *Discipline and Punish* in likening army patrols to a system of disciplined surveillance. But while accepting the salience of discipline in the constitution of modern subjectivities, Killworth signals a fundamental gap within Foucault’s work: namely, that it applies an agent-less and often ahistorical principle of disciplined surveillance to actual situations (3). Arguing that it is human agency at all levels that “breathes life and meaning into the disciplined state” (3), a factor that he believes Foucauldian analysis has traditionally ignored, Killworth sets about the task of specifying the ways in which actual forms of surveillance mounted by British military patrols depend upon personal relationships, history, and knowledge generated by and shared between individual soldiers.

Although the Army’s data gathering system, replete with files, documents, and records, may appear to resemble the modes of subjectification described by Foucault, Killworth demonstrates that the specific kind of knowledge held and utilized by actual soldiers on patrol “is far from Foucauldian, yet is heavily implicated in the disciplined apparatus of the state” (1998: 18). For instance, the presumption that there exists a singular and unidirectional gaze within regimes of disciplined surveillance is flatly contradicted by the experience of British soldiers on the ground in Northern Ireland. Experienced corporals and sergeants, reports Killworth, take pains to stress to newly arriving units that members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army “would take account of details such as which patrols or individuals showed poor drills or attention, and would time and place their attacks accordingly” (19). These practices, notes Kill-
worth, demonstrate the shortcomings of “assuming only one gaze, or in examining systems of disciplined knowledge without embedding them in the concrete, personalized discourses that allow or constrain their operation, and understanding the historical dialogues and processes that form and condition these personalized experiences” (19).

Another perspective upon the “troubles” that engulfed Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s is provided by Allen Feldman’s (1991) appraisal of narratives he collected from paramilitary members. These center upon their engagement in “military” and “political” activities that landed and then kept many of them in prison for extended terms. Guided by Foucauldian models of power, Feldman’s ethnographically grounded analysis, nonetheless, leads him to identify certain limitations to the proffered approach.

Foucault does not acknowledge that it is precisely the self-bifurcation of the prisoner, the mimesis of alterity that is the basis of prison resistance and revolt. The body as the terminal locus of power also defines the place for the redirection and reversal of power. In revolt, the prisoner also bifurcates and objectifies the body as an instrument of violence. The prisoner’s capacity to resist exploits the principle of auto-domination and auto-punition that Foucault identifies with panoptic penal regimes. (178)

The evolving design and administration of prison regimes in Northern Ireland highlighted not only the shifting responses of British authorities to paramilitary claims for status as “political prisoners” but also a sustained clash of disciplinary styles and objectives. On the one side stood the institutional authority and techniques of the state apparatus; the opposing side featured the internal disciplinary forms brought into the prisons collectively and individually by members of groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army.

The systematic reshaping by the British authorities of prison systems as an exercise in counterinsurgency duly prompted far-reaching ideological innovation and tactical adjustments on the part of paramilitary prisoners, leading in turn to the development of the “Blanketmen,” the “Dirty Protest,” and finally to the hunger strike that claimed the lives of Bobby Sands and others. Indeed, Sands first labeled the “H-Block” prisons as the “breaker’s yard” and likened the passage through its disciplinary machinery to a journey into the “inner truth” of the British state (Feldman 1991: 227). Notwithstanding the ostensibly unrivalled disciplinary powers wielded by prison officials, these were ultimately unable to achieve intended objectives. But the limitations of the powers of prison regimes and the capacities of prisoners to engage in studied, effective, and reflective forms of resistance have also been exhibited in other cases, including those of Mahatma Gandhi, Antonio Gramsci, and Nelson Mandela, to name but a few.

Judith Modell’s investigation of local self-help groups established in Hawaii to address domestic violence traces the ways in which there may
be, in contrast to Foucauldian assumptions of unquestioned disciplinary authority, a continual negotiation between state officials and local people concerning their decidedly differing notions of what constitutes proper conduct, ethical behavior, and the virtuous self (2002: 173). Participation in these groups is partly a matter of choice and partly a matter of coercion. Men charged in Family Court as perpetrators were given the option of a jail term or of participating in an anger management group. Female victims of domestic violence could join a domestic violence support group “as a resource against the abuse they were receiving in a relationship. Behind their choice, however, lay the threat that the state, through Child Protective Services, would remove any children they had: the state argued that violence against a mother threatened the children in her household. Voluntary self-discipline took place in the context of state punishment” (174).

What actually ensued in the convening of these groups, reports Modell, “shows the vitality of a local discourse of discipline constantly confronting a mandated, state-authorized, and urbanized discourse” (2002: 176). What became particularly evident during one occasion, when members of the women’s support group repaired to a nearby beach to celebrate a wedding shower for one of their number, was the distance between the state’s view of an appropriate female self and the women’s views of themselves:

For the state’s purposes, components of the individual body are broken down in order to be efficiently disciplined [à la Foucault]. In an American state, sexual activity is one measure of disorder—and the legacy is long in Hawaii, where colonists early saw sex as a sign of recalcitrance. To control “sex” is to produce order and, as well, to separate sexual activity from other behaviours. The women I knew constructed another discipline, premised on the integrity of the body. In their discourse, woman as sexual partner was inseparable from woman as mother. (187)

What Modell discovered through ethnographic inquiry was not “discipline in Foucault’s sense of the state’s authoritarian intrusion into a subject’s interests” (Ibid: 195). Rather, she observed in the meetings of these somewhat inauspiciously convened ‘self-help’ groups vibrant though complicated attempts to create moral communities that attended to the problem of domestic abuse, albeit in terms quite unlike those employed by state authorities.

Reconsidering the Habitus

Ethnographic inquiries into given disciplinary regimes and practices have also prompted some anthropologists to seek inspiration and insight through application of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of habitus. But the difficulties that ethnographers encounter in trying to comprehend the particularities of disciplinary regimes in terms of habitus are not unlike those experi-
enced by anthropologists who have sought to reconcile their findings with Foucault’s dictums on discipline. Peter Collins (2002), for instance, identifies the creation of a code of discipline as being central to the development and survival of Quakerism. But habitus, which he summarizes plainly as “a tendency, resulting from socialization, to behave in certain ways” (80), does not serve to account for the systematic, conscious, and public manner in which Quaker elders and overseers have paid microscopic attention to their coreligionists’ day-to-day behavior (86). In every case, the advices and queries issued by these church leaders emphasized and articulated right action (orthopraxy) and largely disregarded belief (orthodoxy). Unlike Bourdieu’s claim of the class-generated nature of habitus, the Quaker case illustrates a code of discipline that not only emerges from religion but does so through practice preceding belief (88). In an examination of ritual and the disciplines of Salat, Saba Mahmood (2001) develops a related criticism of Bourdieu’s rendering of habitus as the means by which the objective conditions of a society are inscribed in the bodies and dispositions of social actors. Specifically, Mahmood notes that Bourdieu’s “failure to attend to pedagogical moments and practices in the process of acquiring a habitus results in a neglect of the historically and culturally specific embodied capacities that different conceptions of the subject require. It also neglects the precise role various traditions of bodily discipline play in becoming a certain kind of subject” (838).

Eyal Ben-Ari’s (1997) account of body projects in a Japanese daycare center painstakingly presents the ways in which such an institution seeks to train children to carry their bodies in “appropriate” ways without the need for unceasing and explicit supervision. Bracketing these activities analytically under Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, Ben-Ari goes on to describe not only the inculcation of approved modes of child behavior, but also instances of playful criticism, name calling, or cultivation of irony by children, actions that tend either to be ignored outright or labeled as “mischief” or “nonsense” by adults who are present (125). Noting the “deterministic” tendencies of Bourdieu’s formulation of habitus, Ben-Ari concludes that one aspect of the independent activity of children is that it may potentially disrupt and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions of adults; children’s knowledge may even contradict what adults take to be “obvious” (126). Yet, because such incidental activities are prone to being declared “senseless” by adults, children may in practice be left to carry these out without much interference since they are not seen as threatening the “serious” order of the preschool center (130). Ben-Ari concludes that socialization is an entirely less certain undertaking than adults might wish to recognize and that, in consequence, children’s ventures potentially represent an easily underestimated yet recurring political problem within childcare institutions.

Brenda Farnell’s (2000) fieldwork on an Indian reservation in Montana provides the ethnographic basis for a searing critique of Bourdieu’s model
of habitus. She contends that the root of the problem is that of how to define and locate human agency: “If one asks where human agency is located … one finds that ‘habitus’ has replaced ‘person’ as the agentic power, located somewhere ambiguously behind or beneath the agency of persons…. Bourdieu’s model does not recognize that neither ‘rules’ nor ‘habitus’ can use people, because such constructs themselves have no causal efficacy. Only people do” (403–4). What makes the habitus explanatorily “empty,” in Farnell’s view, is that it only describes again the phenomenon to be explained: “Bourdieu tells us that people say and do things habitually according to the ways in which they have been socialized because of their habitus, which thus becomes an artefact of the social theorist’s own practice and his theoretical interests to transcend objectivism and subjectivism. Not unlike reified notions of culture, it becomes a device that gives theoretical discourse a spurious appearance of authority over what is actually happening” (412). In contrast to Bourdieu’s talk about the body, as though it can be described normatively in terms of the ostensible dispositions of a habitus, Farnell’s ethnographic findings feature talk from the body in the form of “accounts of persons enacting their bodies using vocal signs and action signs in dialogical interactional processes” (412).

Critical engagement with the theoretical approaches of Foucault and Bourdieu is, of course, by no means exclusive to anthropology. Michel de Certeau’s (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life* provided an early and earnest rethinking of the nature and practical implications of discipline and habitus in the contemporary world. Expressing his dismay that the tentacles of disciplinary processes seemed everywhere to be growing more extensive and oppressive, de Certeau urged intellectuals to discover how societies might resist being reduced to such grids of coercion: “This approach raises a new and different set of problems to be investigated. Once again … [Foucault’s] ‘micro-physics’ of power privileges the productive apparatus (which produces the ‘discipline’), even though it discerns in ‘education’ a system of ‘repression’ and shows how, from the wings as it were, silent technologies determine or short-circuit institutional stage directions” (xiv). What de Certeau wished to draw attention to were ways of operating that give rise to counterparts (on the side of the dominated) to regimes of discipline. These modes of operating, he suggested, posed questions that were both analogous and contrary to those dealt with by Foucault,

analogous in that the goal is to perceive and analyze the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of “tactics” articulated in the details of everyday life; contrary, in that the goal is not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of “discipline.” (xiv)