

# **Michel Foucault and the Quandary of the Body**

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## **01 - A Question of Definition**

- We could refer to the body politic.
- This could be relevant to the quandary of the body.
- Questioning the politics of the body, as suggested by Michel Foucault, is the topic of my presentation tonight.
- We refer to the body of the person.

## **02 – Foucault – Power and the Body**

- Power is pervasive.
- Power is found in the State; as in statistics and also as aiming for a level stasis, a static... yet static is power...
- Power is used to punish.
- Power is found not only in punitive actions but also in regulations, institutional rules, timetables... and other conditions imposed on the person and on the body of the person.
- Power is ever-present.
- Power is ubiquitous.
- Power is intimate.
- Authorities have a political investment in the control of the body.

## **03 – Foucault – A Short Return to the Social Body**

‘Between every point of the social body, between a man and a woman, between the members of a family, between a master and his pupil, between every one [sic] who knows and every one [sic] who does not, there exists relations of power.’

Michel Foucault 1980, *Power/Knowledge – Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, Pantheon, New York, p.187

## **04 – Foucault – Focus on the Body**

- Michel Foucault 1991, ‘The Body of the Condemned’, *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 3-31.
- Quotes for reflection:

- Torture in 1757; p.3.
- Timetable around 1837: pp.6-7.
- Punishment from visible to abstract; p.9.
- The body as intermediary; p.11.
- The shift from body to soul; p.16.
- Rehabilitation; p.19.
- Madness; p.19.
- Punishing the secret soul; p.25.
- History/story of the body; p.25.
- Knowledge of the body beyond its functioning; p.26.
- Mechanism and modality; p.27. [Modality as in the mode in which something exists.]
- The reality of the body; pp.29-30.
- The revolts against the repression of the body; p.30.
- '[The revolts were] at the level of the body, against the very body of the prison' (p.30).
- The revolts were against the very body of repression.
- The revolts were against repression of the body.

## **05 – Impact of Revolts Against Repression of the Body.**

- One significant impact of the opposition to the repression of the body is the emergence of movements for the liberation of the body; for the respect of the body.
- Examples:
  - Civil rights against racial discrimination.
  - Feminism and such laws as the right to abortion.
  - Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender-Intersex rights.
- The ways of thinking associated with these movements and the recognition of the value of the body, like power, are ever-present, ubiquitous, and intimate.
- Examples:
  - Body image issues.
  - Fitness issues.
  - The tendency to bring everything back to the body; as pointed out by Foucault, when he refers to psychiatry.
- In terms of the everyday, let us not forget the importance of:
  - Fashion: Chanel.
  - The medical: transplants.

- And also such issues as the literal interpretation of the body of religious texts.

**065 – What Does that Say about Today.**

- The move from body to soul, paradoxically perhaps lead to a focus on the body as the essence of what we are.
- However, could that focus then be seen as the body being the incarnation of identity?
- Would it then be the target for those who apply the literal interpretation of the body of religious texts?
- Would this lead to the anti-gay comments made by religious leaders such as Reverent Margaret Court?
- Could it have lead to the targeting of the body as encouraged by religious fanatics?
- And if this is so, how would this then lead us to question the values of countries like Saudi-Arabia and their approach to a form of justice that somehow mirrors the one that Foucault describes at the start of the 'Body of the Condemned'?