

FR118 Strategies for Reading French Texts

Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) Seminar worksheet

First Seminar

Read the first prescribed excerpt, 'Le corps des condamnés' (pp. 1-40) and prepare answers to the following questions:

1. The public execution of Damiens, with which Foucault's book opens, is a very striking example of 'le châtiment-spectacle' (16). What measures were taken by the authorities in an attempt to maximize this spectacular dimension and the impact of the execution on the spectators?
2. Judging from the eye-witness accounts of the execution, from which Foucault quotes, how did members of the public react to the execution they watched?
3. Did the execution go smoothly? Give reasons for your answer.
4. What do you make of Foucault's way of opening his book with this particular spectacle?
5. Foucault contrasts the execution of Damiens (1757) with the rules and regulations of a Paris borstal (c.1838) and asserts that each defines 'un certain style pénal' (14). Summarize the main features of each of these two contrasting 'styles'.
6. What does Foucault say he has learned from Rusche & Kirchheimer's 1939 study? In so far as you can judge from the account he gives, which of his four methodological principles (31-2), or 'règles générales', are particularly indebted to that work?
7. From what Foucault says on pp. 34-8, does he think that what he will say in this book will have wider implications beyond the history of the prison? Can you anticipate in broad terms what these will be, or to which areas of society they will apply?

Read the second excerpt, 'Les moyens du bon dressement' (pp. 200-27) and prepare answers to the following questions:

8. 'Le pouvoir disciplinaire, lui, s'exerce en se rendant invisible; en revanche il impose à ceux qu'il soumet un principe de visibilité obligatoire. Dans la discipline, ce sont les sujets qui ont à être vus. Leur éclairage assure l'emprise du pouvoir qui s'exerce sur eux. C'est le fait d'être vu sans cesse, de pouvoir toujours être vu, qui maintient dans son assujettissement l'individu disciplinaire.' (220) Select and evaluate three of Foucault's examples of the operation of disciplinary power, each from a different social institution discussed in this excerpt, in the light of this quotation.

9. What does Foucault mean when he says that disciplinary power ‘normalizes’ (‘elle normalise’, 215)?

Second Seminar

Read the third excerpt, ‘Le panoptisme’ (228-64) and prepare answers to the following questions:

1. Compare and contrast the anti-plague measures and the Panopticon.
2. Who was Jeremy Bentham and with which branch of philosophical ethics is he particularly associated?
3. Research the etymology of ‘Panopticon’. In the light of this etymology and what Foucault says about Bentham’s design explain why Foucault describes the Panopticon not just as a vision of the perfect prison but as the very model of disciplinary power (‘le diagramme d’un mécanisme de pouvoir ramené ^ sa forme idéale’ (239)).
4. ‘Autant de cages, autant de petits théâtres, où chaque acteur est seul, parfaitement individualisé et constamment visible.’ (233) Compare and contrast the use of spectacle in the Panopticon with the spectacle of Damians’ execution. Why is it important that each prisoner is ‘parfaitement individualisé’ in the Panopticon?
5. Discuss Foucault’s use of historical and textual sources and other evidence in this excerpt. What kinds of text and testimony does he draw on to support his assertions and how persuaded are you by his argumentation?
6. In the light of material covered in the first of the two lectures and the references on pp.39-40, to what extent do you think this theoretical text can be read autobiographically?
7. If *Surveiller et punir* is, among other things, theory, what is theory? (Don’t spend too long on this question.)