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Author(s): Judith Butler

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FOUCAULT AND THE PARADOX OF BODILY INSCRIPTIONS*

THE position that the body is constructed is one that is surely, if not immediately, associated with Michel Foucault. The body is a site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves, a nodal point or nexus for relations of juridical and productive power. And, yet, to speak in this way invariably suggests that there is a body that is in some sense there, pregiven, existentially available to become the site of its own ostensible construction. What is it that circumscribes this site called “the body”? How is this delimitation made, and who makes it? Which body qualifies as “the” body? What establishes the ‘the’, the existential status of this body? Does the existent body in its anonymous universality have a gender, an unspoken one? What shape does this body have, and how is it to be known? Where did “the body” come from? To claim that “the body is culturally constructed” is, on the one hand, to assert that whatever meanings or attributes the body acquires are in fact culturally constituted and variable. But note that the very construction of the sentence confounds the meaning of ‘construction’ itself. Is “the body” ontologically distinct from the process of construction it undergoes? If that is the case, then it would appear that “the body,” which is the object or surface on which construction occurs, is itself prior to construction. In other words, “the body” would not be constructed, strictly considered, but would be the occasion, the site, or the condition of a process of construction only externally related to the body that is its object. In effect, the statement, ‘the body is constructed’, refuses to allow that the indefinite article is itself a construction that calls for a genealogical account. But perhaps the

* To be presented in an APA symposium on the Thought of Michel Foucault, December 30. Ladelle McWhorter and David F. Gruber will be co-symposiasts; see this JOURNAL, this issue, 608–614 and 615–621, respectively, for their contributions.

referential claim of the statement is rhetorical, that is, treating the body named within the sentence not as an object that receives a construction, i.e., as a substantive thing that might take on a contingent attribution. Perhaps instead it is necessary to read the statement in a self-referential way, that is, as asserting that any reference to “the” body in its indefiniteness is of necessity a construction, one that is open to a genealogical critique.

Within a number of texts, Foucault clearly questions whether there is a “materiality” to bodies which is in any sense separable from the ideational or cultural meanings that constitute bodies within specific social fields. In *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*,¹ he claims that the body is a site of culturally contested meanings, and that “sex,” what we might be tempted to rank among the most factic aspects of bodily life, is itself an “imaginary point,” the consequence of a materiality fully “invested” with ideas. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,”² Foucault clearly writes, “. . . nothing in man (sic)—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men (sic)” (*ibid.*, p. 153). Foucault’s efforts to describe the mechanism by which bodies are constituted as cultural constructions, however, raises the question of whether there is in fact a body which is external to its construction, invariant in some of its structures, and which, in fact, represents a dynamic locus of resistance to culture per se.

This last claim is no doubt surprising for anyone who has read Foucault’s critique of the twin evils of liberationist sexuality and psychoanalytic theory in *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*. In that text Foucault claimed quite clearly that there could be no body before the law, no sexuality freed from relations of power. If the body in its indefinite generality, however, proves to be a point of dynamic resistance to culture per se, then this body is not culturally constructed, but is, in fact, the inevitable limit and failure of cultural construction. I shall argue in the following that, whereas Foucault wants to argue—and does claim—that bodies are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes, and that there is no materiality or ontological independence of the body outside of any one of those specific regimes, his theory nevertheless relies on a notion of genealogy, appropriated from Nietzsche, which conceives the body as a surface and a set of subterranean “forces” that are, indeed, repressed and transmuted by a mechanism of cultural construction external to that body. Further, this mechanism of

¹ Robert Hurley, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1980).

² In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* by Michel Foucault, Donald F. Bouchard, trans., Sherry Simon and Donald F. Bouchard, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell, 1977).

cultural construction is understood as “history,” and the specific operation of “history” is understood, and understood problematically, as inscription. Indeed, I shall try to show that, for Foucault, not unlike for Kafka in *The Penal Colony*, the cultural construction of the body is effected through the figuration of “history” as a writing instrument that produces cultural significations—language—through the disfiguration and distortion of the body, where the body is figured as a ready surface or blank page available for inscription, awaiting the “imprint” (*ibid.*, 148) of history itself. Although Foucault appears to argue that the body does not exist outside the terms of its cultural inscription, it seems that the very mechanism of “inscription” implies a power that is necessarily external to the body itself. The critical question that emerges from these considerations is whether the understanding of the process of cultural construction on the model of “inscription”—a logocentric move if ever there was one—entails that the “constructed” or “inscribed” body have an ontological status apart from that inscription, precisely the claim that Foucault wants to refute.

Within “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault describes the body through a series of metaphors and figures, yet predominantly as a “surface,” a set of multidirectional “forces,” and as the scene or site of a cultural inscription. He writes: “the body is the inscribed surface of events” (*ibid.*). The task of genealogy, he claims, is “to expose a body totally imprinted by history” (*ibid.*). His sentence continues, however, by referring to the goal of “history” as the “destruction of the body” (*ibid.*). This remark paradoxically recalls Freud’s description of “civilization,” that juridical structure of power exercised through the repression and sublimation of primary drives that Foucault seeks to criticize in *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*. Forces and impulses with multiple directionalities are precisely what “history” both destroys and preserves through the *Entstehung* (historical emergence) of inscription. As “a volume in perpetual disintegration,” Foucault writes, the body is always under seige, suffering destruction by the very terms of history. History is understood as that creator of values and meanings, that signifying practice, which requires the subjection of the body in order to produce the speaking subject and its significations. Described through the language of surface and force, this is a body weakened through what Foucault in a radically ahistorical way terms the “single drama” of history, a drama or a structure of repressive signification which requires a subjugation and inscription of the body for the creation of new values (*ibid.*, p. 150). This is not the *modus vivendi* of one kind of history rather than another, but rather “history” (*ibid.*, p. 148) in its essential repressive/generative gesture.

Although Foucault writes that the body is not stable and cannot serve as a common identity among individuals cross-culturally or transhistorically, he nevertheless points to the constancy of cultural inscription as a “single drama,” suggesting that this drama of historical “inscription” enjoys the very universality denied to the body *per se*. If the creation of values, that signifying practice of history, requires the destruction of the body, much as the instrument of torture in Kafka’s *Penal Colony* destroys the body on which it writes, then there must be a body prior to that inscription, stable and self-identical, subject to and capable of that sacrificial destruction. In a sense, for Foucault, as for Nietzsche, cultural values emerge as the result of an inscription *on* the body, where the body is understood as a medium, indeed, a blank page, an unusual one, to be sure, for it appears to bleed and suffer under the pressure of a writing instrument. In order for this inscription to signify, however, the body-as-medium must itself be destroyed and transvaluated into a sublimated (to use Freud’s language) or “transvaluated” (to use Nietzsche’s language) domain of values. Implicit to this description of the creation of cultural values is the notion of history as a relentless writing instrument, and the body as the medium that must be destroyed and transfigured in order for “culture” to emerge.

By maintaining a body prior to its cultural inscription, Foucault appears to assume a materiality to the body prior to its signification and form. In separate contexts, Foucault appears paradoxically to criticize both Freud and Nietzsche for assuming a prediscursive ontology of the body and its drives. In *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*, he argues that desires that psychoanalysis claims are repressed are, in fact, produced by psychoanalysis as a juridical practice. Indeed, “repressed desire,” he appears to suggest, is a consequence of psychoanalytic discourse, a delectable discursive production, a contemporary fabrication and organization of sexuality. Quite directly, in fact, he argues against the conceptualization of a juridical and repressive law that presumes that there is a “rebellious energy” (p. 81) that temporally and ontologically precedes repression. The effect of his genealogical critique of the repressive hypothesis is to conceive the discursive figuration of drives and/or desires as simultaneous with or consequent to the law, rather than its antecedent presupposition. Interestingly, Foucault provides, in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*,³ an implicit yet parallel critique of Nietzsche’s presumption of a prediscursive instinctuality. In *The Genealogy of Morals* (section II), Nietzsche argues that the multi-

³ Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1979).

plicitous and life-affirming instincts are negated and internalized through the prohibitive effects of slave-morality. Foucault, however, challenges the language of internalization and the distinction between inner psychic and external social space which that language implies.

Foucault objected to what he understood to be the psychoanalytic belief in the "inner" truth of sex in *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*. In *Discipline and Punish*, he similarly refuses the doctrine of internalization in his account of the subjection and subjectivation of criminals. The prohibitive law is not taken into the body, internalized or incorporated, but rather is written *on* the body, the structuring principle of its very shape, style, and exterior signification. Consider the generative play of surface significations and the refusal to engage a concept of interior psychic space in the following quotation: "the body is . . . directly involved in a political field; power-relations have an immediate hold on it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (*ibid.*, p. 25).

In a sense, *Discipline and Punish* can be read as Foucault's effort to reconceive Nietzsche's doctrine of internalization as a language of inscription. In the context of prisoners, Foucault writes, the strategy has not been to enforce a repression of their criminal impulse, but to compel their bodies to signify the prohibitive law as their manifest essence, style, and necessity. That law is not literally internalized, but incorporated *on* bodies; there the law is manifest as a sign of the essence of their selves, the meaning of their soul, their conscience, the law of their desire. In effect, the law is fully dissimulated into the body as such; it is the principle that confers intelligibility on that body, the sign by which it is socially known. The juridical law no longer appears external to the bodies it subjects and subjectivates. "It would be wrong," Foucault writes, "to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently *around, on, within*, the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those that are punished . . ." (*ibid.*, p. 29; my italics). The figure of the interior soul understood as "within" the body is produced through its inscription *on* the body; indeed, the soul is inscribed on the surface, a signification that produces on the flesh the illusion of an ineffable depth. The soul as a structuring invisibility is produced in and by signs that are visible and the corporeal. Indeed, the soul requires the body for its signification, and requires also that the body signify its own limit and depth through corporeal means. Furthermore, the body must signify in a way that conceals the very fact of that signifying, indeed that

makes that signifying practice appear only as its reified "effect," that is, as the ontological necessity of a defining and immaterial internality and depth.

The effect of the soul as a structuring inner space is produced through the signification of a body as a vital and sacred enclosure. The soul is precisely what the body lacks; hence, the body presents itself as a signifying lack. That lack which *is* the body signifies the soul as that which cannot show. In this sense, then, the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed *on* the body as a social signification that perpetually conceals itself as such. In Foucault's terms, the soul is not imprisoned by or within the body but, inversely, "the soul is the prison of the body" (*ibid.*, p. 30).

The critical power of Foucault's analysis assumes that only under certain conditions of power and discourse do bodies get signified and regulated in the ways that he describes in *Discipline and Punish* and in *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History," however, Foucault "confesses" his metaphysical commitments in such a way that the critical power of his genealogical critique is severely undermined. In that essay, he makes clear that "subjection," though historically specific in its modalities, is also the essential and transhistorical precondition of "history" writ large; indeed, he makes clear that this signifiatory or generative subjection is the essential gesture of a singular history, its one infinitely repeatable "drama."

In the introduction to *The Order of Things*,⁴ Foucault rather defensively suggests that, although structuralism exists as the reigning philosophical ethos of his time, and his own work invariably engages the philosophical vocabulary of structuralism, he nevertheless does not feel constrained by its terms. Although I would not want to reduce Foucault's work to a structuralist position, I would argue that the notion of signification as a universal cultural law that produces meanings through the subjection and disfiguration of the materiality of bodies seems fully derivable from Claude Lévi-Strauss's analysis of the structure of kinship exchange. For Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo institutes identities along the axis of sexual difference and, hence, represses bodies in order to produce highly structured kinship relations. The materiality of "bodies" for Lévi-Strauss constitutes "nature" or "the raw," whereas the prohibitions that repress sexuality and create social organization are "culture" and the "cooked." Whereas Foucault appears to criticize precisely those binary oppositions encoded by structuralism as the universal

⁴ New York: Random, 1971.

tensions of anthropology, he appears to reengage those oppositions in his own descriptions of how historical meanings come into being. That history is “inscribed” or “imprinted” onto a body that is not history suggests not only that the body constitutes the material surface preconditional to history, but that the deregulation and subversion of given regimes of power are effected by the body’s resistance against the workings of history itself. In other words, Foucault appears to have identified in a prediscursive and prehistorical “body” a source of resistance to history and to culture, where history and culture are finally and paradoxically conceived in juridical terms. That this is contrary to Foucault’s stated program to formulate power in its generative as well as juridical modes seems clear. Yet his statements on “history” appear to undermine precisely the insight into the constructed status of the body which his studies on sexuality and criminality were supposed to establish.

Because the distinction between the historical act of inscription and the body as surface and resistance is presupposed in the task of genealogy as he defines it, the distinction itself is precluded as an object of genealogical investigation. Indeed, the distinction not only operates as an uncritically accepted and implicitly formulated premise of his argument, but it ends up undermining the central point that his argument concerning the constructed status of bodies was supposed to prove. Occasionally, in his *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I*, or in his brief introduction to the journals of Herculine Barbin, the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite, Foucault seeks recourse to a prediscursive multiplicity of bodily forces that break through the surface of the body to disrupt the regulating practices of cultural coherence imposed upon that body by a regulatory regime, understood as some vicissitude of “history.” If the presumption of a source of potential precategorical disruption is refused, and if the very notion of the body as surface externally related to the act of inscription is subjected to a genealogical critique, would it be possible to give a Foucaultian account of the demarcation of bodies as such as a signifying practice? How would “the” body as cultural or discursive practice be described?

What is clear is that inscription would be neither an act initiated by a reified history nor the performative accomplishment of a master historian who produces history as he writes it. The culturally constructed body would be the result of a diffuse and active structuring of the social field with no magical or ontotheological origins, structuralist distinctions, or fictions of bodies, subversive or otherwise, ontologically intact before the law.

JUDITH BUTLER

Johns Hopkins University