Disciplinary Power in Modern Society: Analytical Essay

Power is a continually evolving phenomenon that has no single definition, interpretation, or manifestation. Throughout history, power has assumed all kinds of forms; strength, violence, wealth, etc. In the era of spectacular public execution, power was demonstrated by instilling extreme fear; as if each tortured criminal was a reminder of hierarchical societal organization and the consequences of disobedience, to the point that the punishment seems more gruesome than the crime itself, as illustrated vividly by Foucault. However, in the contemporary life, I think that power is at its most complicated, yet at the same time, simplest form; disciplinary societal control.

Long gone are the days when horses pulled apart criminals' corpses. Punishment is no longer as short-lived as a single show or as final as death. Rather, punishment and power are now mind games targeted towards the soul, signaling a shift from sovereign power to what we call disciplinary power. With disciplinary power, basic rights such as freedom and wealth are taken away and the people in question are forced to abide by certain rules imposed by the powerful, such as the rules for the prisoners in Paris by Leon Faucher wherein the prisoners are made to follow strict on-the-clock lifestyles (Foucault, 1977). In other words, there is an attempt to desensitize the soul in the hopes of rehabilitating it, or more generally, changing or controlling it. More than the act or crime, the personhood of the actor is considered; what he/she is, and what he/she can become, and power is now about taking control over people rather than a mere show-off of hierarchy. Eventually, the prisoners were made to do physical labor and to contribute to public works. Jumping from this, I think that punishment has started to assume a utilitarian role which eventually spilled out of the prison and into everyday civilian life.

In modern society, networks of disciplinary power are at play. It is no longer solely about punishment of criminals. Rather, disciplinary power becomes sort of normative for civilians as well. Strict rules and structures are made, roles and disciplines are assumed by people, norms are dictated, and most of it are according to the plan of the powerful, whether it is the government, or the private sector. Societal blueprints are laid out and people are conditioned to execute them. Those who follow are rewarded and those who disobey are punished, again via the soul. Moreover, power is no longer sustained by showing it off, but rather, by making everyone serve power through societal roles and institutions. Power per se becomes invisible, and focus is given more on the objects of power. This is how institutions such as hospitals, schools, big malls, and offices continue to operate for long periods of time; people of succeeding generations continue to work for them. Everything is calculated and regulated.

Aside from these integral structures, disciplinary power is also present in judging and establishing acceptable social norms. Since cultures and contexts vary, acceptable norms also vary. From this, we can pull out a lot of examples including legality of Marijuana in many European countries while Marijuana users in the Philippines are being killed, the criminality of the Hitler salute despite it not hurting anyone, Hong Kong being pushed by China to reject democracy etc. There are gradients of what is acceptable, and one might argue that the legality of things is mythical, and that the government just wants to establish its reminders of disciplinary power by coming up with punishable actions despite having no absolute moral judgment.

Given the intricacies and wide impact of disciplinary power, especially under governments, politics is then an a priori of law-making, of articulating the specifics of disciplinary power. To be able to make effective rules and policies, or in other words, to be able to construct the true supreme good over a governed place, politics is essential in determining which common goods affect most people, and thus should be prioritized and upheld by disciplinary power. Leaders cannot just make laws without analyzing politics, because after all, the law is only a mechanism of politics. Policies that do not fit governed people will eventually cause trouble and instability.

To sum up all the points I have mentioned, let us consider the Loyola Schools as one final example for disciplinary power in a modern society. As a student enters Ateneo, he/she might realize the opportunity for a new start, with all the possibilities at his/her fingertips. However, as we know, Ateneo is full of disciplinary power everywhere, and the student is actually about to go down a path that has already been carved for her. He/she may have the illusion of choice a lot of times, such as choosing which professors to take, which clothes to wear, which classes to cut. However, at the end of the day, she has to take a pre-determined set of classes, follow the student dress code, and can only cut a fixed amount of times. Moreover, there is an increasing minimum grade requirement every year for her to stay in the LS. As he/she follows all the rules and requirements, he/she becomes a servant to the disciplinary power that is the Ateneo. Because of this, Ateneo's power and prestige is sustained for the future generations of students to experience. However, I am sure that when Ateneo came up with its rules, a lot of politics and analyzing was done, and these rules were deemed to be good for the students or essential in maintaining power over students. If Ateneo were to suddenly and unreasonably revise its rules, say, increase the retention grade requirement to 3.8/4, then the students would probably have an uprising and cause instability in the institution. Not to mention, Ateneo is a network of disciplinary powers; the ADAA, OSA, etc.

Yes, disciplinary power in modern society may seem a bit dictatorial in the sense that everything is regulated, but I think this is necessary to be able to maintain order, societal organization, peace, and eventually lead to societal development. With the right leaders, the right politics, and a balanced and holistic approach to law-making, a disciplinary society can be a good, and free society towards the path to achieving its full potential.

Source:

1. Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison. New York: Vintage Books.