







1

ABNORMAL

HE CONCEPT OF the "abnormal" emerges within (and contributes to the construction of) Foucault's understanding of normalization – a key technique that constitutes and bridges two general forms of modern power: disciplinary power and biopower. The abnormal is the "other" that defines the "normal"; it is the object that gives rise to criminal psychiatry (as an attempt to treat, or at least explain, abnormality), and it also becomes a linchpin of modern racism. This presentation shall work from the general to the specific, starting from an identification of the forms of modern power in which the concept of the abnormal functions, through the particular techniques of normalization, to the details of how the abnormal has functioned within these contexts and its significance.

In marking a distinction between modern disciplinary power and biopower on the one hand and sovereign power on the other, Foucault states that although it does not disappear with the rise of modernity, sovereign power does cease to be the predominant form that power takes. The defining characteristic of sovereign power is the "right to take life and let live" (ECF-SMD, 241). This right is graphically illustrated in the opening pages of Discipline and Punish through a description of Robert-François Damiens's execution, in which the king's power is violently and publicly exhibited on Damiens's tortured body. In contradistinction to sovereign power, possessed and wielded over others by an individual, modern power is characterized by relations in which actions affect other actions, and in which all parties have the capacity to act. "[W]hat defines a relationship of power," Foucault states, "is that it is a mode of action which ... acts upon ... actions" (EEW3, 340). Moreover, he contends that within power relations, "the other ... is recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts" (ibid.). Disciplinary power operates by way of techniques that train individual bodies to become efficient at a limited range of activities, and is primarily a mechanism of institutions (schools, prisons, workplaces). Biopower operates by way of techniques that manage populations (specifically at the



4 / DIANNA TAYLOR

biological level of the human species) in order to maximize their overall health, and is primarily a mechanism of the state.

It is apparent from even this brief sketch that the effects of modern power are much more expansive than those of sovereign power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault illustrates that sovereign power's impact, dramatic though it may be, is experienced directly and therefore most intensely only by the condemned person and those who witness his or her execution. Yet within modern societies as Foucault describes them, everyone (with the exception of persons who have been deprived of their capacity to act and hence suffer under conditions of domination) is directly affected by power because we are all involved in navigating power relations. According to Foucault, a key factor in the circulation and proliferation of modern power is the concept of the norm.

In his 1975 Collège de France course "Abnormal," Foucault asserts, "The norm is not simply and not even a principle of intelligibility; it is an element on the basis of which a certain exercise of power is founded and legitimized" (ECF-AB, 50). Simply put, the norm – the idea of having a standard (or that a standard exists or can be instituted) by which to evaluate and thereby determine "optimal" modes of behavior, levels of productivity, states of health, and the like – establishes what is normal (ECF-STP, 57). Once parameters of normality are set, techniques of "normalization" emerge that function to enforce those parameters. These techniques "make normal" in two ways. First, they intervene within both individual bodies and populations in ways that bring them into conformity with particular social norms. Within a disciplinary context, the norm gets established by, for example, schools developing and implementing standards that are intended to promote what is considered to be effective learning. Pupils' bodies are then trained (in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discusses methods of teaching and learning proper penmanship) so that they perform in ways that produce desired outcomes.

Second, techniques of normalization enforce normality by reproducing particular social norms (and thereby reinforcing the idea of normality more generally) to the point that they come to be seen not as produced at all but simply as natural and necessary. When norms become sedimented to the point that they are uncritically accepted in this manner, they can be said to be "normalizing." By presenting a limited range of modes of thought and existence not only as desirable but also as given, normalizing norms curtail persons' ability to act. They therefore reduce the fluidity of power relations and threaten to produce states of domination where modes of thought and existence are merely and simply dictated.

Foucault is describing a kind of circular relationship of mutual reinforcement whereby the norm generates the concept of the normal, which in turn generates techniques that, by way of promoting conformity with, reproducing, and thus presenting as ineluctable particular social norms, reasserts the significance of normality. But he also shows that the norm may function to expand power's scope. The norm,



Abnormal / 5

Foucault asserts, "circulates between" the body and the population (ECF-SMD, 253). By forging a relationship between the two targets of modern power, the norm facilitates the spread of (potentially normalizing) power across "the whole surface" of society (ibid.).

Through rearticulating and legitimating both the concept of the normal and particular social norms, techniques of normalization also demarcate boundaries between what is normal and what is not, between what can be made to be normal and what cannot, thereby giving rise to the concept of the abnormal. Within the context of a normalizing society, abnormality can be understood in the most general sense as that which deviates from the norm. Simply put, abnormality is nonconformity or "non-observance, that which does not measure up to the rule, that departs from it" (EDP, 178). Such departure is devalued but it is not, as we might expect, simply "excluded and rejected" (ECF-AB, 50). Rather, the concept of the abnormal plays a role analogous to that of normality in facilitating the circulation of power and proliferating normalizing power relations. Just as techniques of normalization intervene within bodies and populations in such a way as to produce and enforce particular normals that reassert the concept of the normal, these same techniques by means of the same intervention function to identify, define, categorize, observe, and render visible – in other words, produce and enforce – particular abnormals that reassert the concept of the "abnormal." This conceptualization and rendering visible of abnormality is normalizing. In conveying to us what we do not want to be, and what we must try to avoid becoming, the concept of the abnormal effectively reasserts prevailing notions of normality not only by reinforcing prevailing social norms but also by challenging the limits of those norms and thus calling forth new fields of inquiry and producing new forms of knowledge, new institutions, and new state functions – in other words, by producing new norms. From a Foucauldian perspective, then, the abnormal, like the normal, is implicated in normalizing relations of power.

Although his 1975 Collège course focuses primarily on the articulation and function of the abnormal within the context of disciplinary power, as Foucault's most extensive study of this concept *Abnormal* proves instructive in understanding important aspects of his thinking. The genealogy provided in the course illustrates the link between the concept of the abnormal and normalization. Tracing the origins of the modern abnormal individual through the figures of the human monster of the medieval period to the eighteenth century, the individual to be corrected of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the masturbating child of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Foucault shows that the historical expansion of the category of the abnormal corresponds to an expansion in the scope of normalizing power. Monsters, which violate laws of both nature and society, are rare; Foucault states that they are "by definition the exception" (ECF-AB, 58). The individual to be corrected, by contrast, is commonplace, an "everyday phenomenon" (ibid.). This figure violates normative relations within the economy of the family – that is, the family



6 / DIANNA TAYLOR

as a social institution situated within a web of other such institutions, including "the school, workshop, street, quarter, parish, church, police, and so on" (ibid.). The masturbator, violator of familial norms concerning the nature of intimacy (specifically, of one's intimate relationship to one's own body), "seems to be an almost universal" figure (ibid.).

In the face of each of these violations, new fields of study, new forms of knowledge, new institutions and institutional relations, and therefore new norms and techniques of normalization emerge. The cases of Henriette Cornier and Charles Jouy illustrate that violations by the monster and the individual to be corrected lead to the emergence and advancement of the field of criminal psychiatry. Cornier, lacking any apparent motive, the readily identifiable physiological irregularities of the "natural monster," and madness, decapitated a neighbor's child. Her act thus simultaneously invokes and confounds the two fields of inquiry, law and medicine, that would have been called on to make sense of it, thus giving rise to the new field of criminal psychiatry, which uses classical techniques of disciplinary power such as normalizing judgment, surveillance, and examination. In the absence of overt manifestations of abnormality, authorities investigated Cornier's life, studying how she lived and who she was - they examined her character. Doing so, they determined that Henriette Cornier's life had deteriorated into "debauchery," that her character was flawed, and that her action reflected those inherent flaws. In other words, they determined that Cornier's abnormality was implicit rather than overt: Cornier was a "moral monster" (ECF-AB, 124).

Jouy's case advances the field of criminal psychiatry and its techniques of normalization. Jouy, a forty-year-old "agricultural worker" whom Foucault describes as being "more or less the village idiot," was charged in 1867 with raping a young girl by the name of Sophie Adam (ECF-AB, 292). Unlike Cornier, who was deemed to have developed an immoral, monstrous character (apparent in the fact that she separated from her husband and subsequently twice became pregnant, giving both children up for adoption), Jouy's abnormality was considered to be innate. It did not emerge at a particular point in time, nor was it attributed to Jouy's character; instead, Jouy's abnormality, and hence his crime, was attributed to inborn qualities or traits. Authorities subjected Jouy to physical examination in an effort to identify not the cause of his act but "stigmata" - external manifestations of his aberrant nature (ECF-AB, 298). "[Jouy's] act and its stigmata," according to Foucault, "refer ... to a permanent, constitutive, congenital condition. The deformities of the body are, as it were, the physical and structural outcomes of this condition, and the aberrations of conduct, those precisely that earned Jouy his indictment, are its instinctual and dynamic outcomes" (ibid.).

Foucault's analysis shows that as abnormality becomes increasingly ubiquitous it also becomes increasingly implicit. There are two important effects of power associated with this development. First, abnormality becomes more difficult to detect, thereby giving rise to the need for the kinds of normalizing techniques just described



Abnormal / 7

that aim to access and illuminate individuals' inherent natures. Second, abnormality becomes part of who we are, not merely a characteristic of our actions: it's not that Cornier and Jouy committed acts that departed from the norm but rather that they themselves *were* abnormal. For Foucault, the cases of Cornier and Jouy make clear that the idea of an inherent human nature itself, whether that nature is normal or abnormal, "is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference to a certain type of knowledge, the machinery by which the power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of power" (EDP, 29).

While violations by the moral monster and individual to be corrected facilitate the emergence and advancement of a new field of inquiry, new forms of knowledge, and new techniques of normalization, Foucault shows that violations of familial norms by the masturbating child facilitate a redefinition and social repositioning of the institution of the family that is itself normalizing. The eighteenth century witnessed an explosion of discourse on the topic of childhood masturbation that, Foucault asserts, essentially functioned as an antimasturbation "campaign." Although this campaign drew an association between masturbation and abnormal sexuality, it focused primarily on the "somatic" effects of masturbation, which were said to be abnormal physiological development and physical illness. The campaign also identified "seduction by an adult" as being "the most frequent cause of masturbation," the adults in question being nonparental figures ("[s]ervants, governesses, private tutors, uncles, aunts, and cousins") who were present in the family home (ECF-AB, 243, 244). Preventing masturbation and the risk of abnormality associated with it thus required a change in the structure of the family.

This change, Foucault shows, ultimately led to the more general redefinition of the family as an institution. Given the threat they have come to pose, "[i]ntermediaries," the nonparental adult figures, "disappear" from the household (ECF-AB, 247). Parents now have a direct relationship to their children that is also characterized by close physical proximity, enabling them to watch for potential signs that their children are masturbating, as well as for symptoms of emerging physiological abnormality or illness. Yet while this new "possum-like" closeness, as Foucault puts it, allows parents to identify signs and symptoms, treating illness should it occur requires outside medical intervention (ECF-AB, 249). Parents do not possess expert medical knowledge and, moreover, although there can be no denying that masturbation is ultimately about sexuality, it is precisely sexuality that is being disavowed within the family's understanding of and approach to the "problem" of masturbation: that which is in fact at the heart of the issue, sexuality, "is silent within the family" (ECF-AB, 251). In the face of this disavowal, physicians are required not only to treat patients but also to adopt the role of confessor. "Medicine," Foucault notes, "is able to put sexuality into words and make it speak at the very moment that the family makes it visible because it is watching over it" (ibid.).



8 / DIANNA TAYLOR

Foucault is describing here a fundamental change in what is considered "normal" family structure. Specifically, he details the displacement of the "big relational family" by the nuclear family, and the almost simultaneous medicalization of the family that accompanies it (ECF-AB, 249). This new social norm, according to Foucault, exposes the family and its individual members to scrutiny and intervention by a variety of institutions (medicine, pedagogy) as well as by the state (social services, public health). "Restricting the family in this way, and giving it such a compact and close-knit look," he declares, "effectively opens it up to political and moral criteria; opens it up to a type of power and to a technique of power relayed by medicine and doctors together with families" (ECF-AB, 256). This new medicalized nuclear family "functions as a source of normalization.... [I]t is this family that reveals ... the normal and the abnormal in the sexual domain. The family becomes not only the basis for the determination and distinction of sexuality but also for the rectification of the abnormal" (ECF-AB, 254).

Foucault's genealogy analyzes specific figures that both illustrate abnormality as being a departure from the norm and elucidate its historical evolution into a phenomenon that is widespread, pervasive, and threatening, yet also inherent and therefore difficult to identify and root out. In doing so, it provides an account of the identification, definition, categorization, observation, and general rendering visible – in short, the (re)production and expansion – of the abnormal and the normalizing effects of power associated with it. Foucault concludes his 1975 course by providing some insight into the implications such a conceptualization of abnormality would have in the twentieth century and twenty-first century, and in doing so invokes some themes that figure prominently in later work, especially his work on biopower.

The view of abnormality as inherent, Foucault argues, has particularly profound effects in light of the rise and prominence of the science of heredity. Two of these effects he considered particularly worthy of his attention. The first is that "the theory of heredity allows psychiatry of the abnormal" to become "a technology of the healthy or unhealthy, useful or dangerous, profitable or harmful marriage" (ECF-AB, 315). This concern with marriage as an institution will expand into a general social concern with the process of reproduction. The second important effect is that concerns about abnormality as a heritable trait, as something that can be passed on to offspring, give rise to the theory of "degeneration," which posits that the reproduction and dissemination of abnormality throughout a population threatens its overall health. "The degenerate," according to Foucault, is the abnormal individual whose abnormality is inherited and thus biologically based, as well as scientifically "proven" (ECF-AB, 315).

This scientization of abnormality allows the field of psychiatry to "[dispense] with the need to find a cure" (ECF-AB, 316). If abnormality is written into one's genetic code, so to speak, efforts toward "rectification" are clearly in vain. In a reference to the emergence of biopower, Foucault argues that insofar as this is the



Abnormal / 9

case, psychiatry shifts its attention away from curing abnormals and toward the "protection" of society from the biological threat that degenerates pose (ibid.). For him, the extent of the abnormal's implication in normalizing power, the propensity of normalizing power to deteriorate into states of domination, and the destructive character of domination itself are perhaps most apparent in this perceived need by a society to ward off what manifests as a threat at the biological level of the human species. "This notion of degeneration and these analyses of heredity" as articulated specifically within psychiatric discourse, according to Foucault, "give rise to" a new form of racism that in turn informs Nazism (ECF-AB, 316). "The new racism specific to the twentieth century, this neoracism as the internal means of defense of a society against its abnormal individuals, is the child of psychiatry," he contends, "and Nazism did no more than graft this new racism onto the ethnic racism that was endemic in the nineteenth century" (ECF-AB, 317).

Dianna Taylor

SEE ALSO

Biopower
Discipline
Madness
Normalization
Psychiatry
Georges Canguilhem

SUGGESTED READING

Canguilhem, Georges. 1962. "Monstrosity and the Monstrous," *Diogenes* 10:27–42. *The Normal and the Pathological*. 1991. New York: Zone Books.

Taylor, Dianna. 2009. "Normativity and Normalization," *Foucault Studies* 7:45–63.



2

ACTUALITY

HE NOTION OF "actuality" in Foucault's work points toward a particular understanding of and relation to present social reality. Understood simply, actuality may be identified with the concrete sociohistorical conditions that define the contemporary moment. Actuality thus concerns the specificity of the "now" in which we find ourselves, but is not the same as the present or as the sum of reality in general. That is, actuality is not equivalent to the present moment; it is not merely a slice of time, not merely a temporal notion. But neither is it equivalent to all that exists; it is not merely an aggregation of what is. In contrast, actuality is a defining set of events that mark the distinctiveness of the current time. Thus, Foucault describes himself to be a kind of radical journalist "insofar as what interests me is actuality, what happens around us, what we are, what occurs in the world" (quoted in Ewald 1999, 82).

Yet, this sense of actuality involves more than a simple interest in current affairs. Comprehension of actuality entails, furthermore, a certain distance from the "now." The relation to the present that defines actuality can be understood as one in which we break with current conditions. Actuality, therefore, is linked to critique and with the attitude that Foucault describes as that of "modernity." Thus, Foucault's notion of actuality is elaborated in relationship to Kant and the Kantian understanding of the limits and critical use of reason. For Foucault, Kant's meditation on Enlightenment is both an analysis that "situates actuality with respect to the overall movement [of humanity into maturity] and its basic directions" and "a reflection by Kant on the actuality of his own enterprise" (EFR, 38; see also ECF-GSO, 11–21 – the English translation of this course renders "actualité" as "present reality"). What distinguishes the Kantian text on Enlightenment as one that concerns itself with actuality is the way it links historical reflection with critical analysis of the present and situates Kant's own philosophical project at this juncture. Thus, the text represents the inauguration of the ethos of modernity that is defined by "a mode of relating to actuality ...