The School Meal: A Civilising Technology?

Docile bodies?

Like much of Foucault’s (1995) work, Discipline and Punish has frequently been debated, and subjected to multiple interpretations in many of the social sciences where it has been inserted into a variety of disciplined spaces. Indeed, a less than generous reading of this debate might suggest that many of the key elements of Discipline and Punish have to a large extent been misunderstood, even misinterpreted. But that sort of reading would suggest that we, and a number of others, have been able to discern more accurately what it was that Foucault really meant by terms such as bio-power, discipline, panopticism, docile bodies (though it is possible to get these, as with anything, wrong). That is not what we want to claim, or to achieve here. Instead, our aim is to open up a space for thinking about the myriad ‘little practices’ that can be encountered in school dining rooms, and the purposes (implied or explicit) and consequences (intended or otherwise) that these practices serve and produce. The part of Discipline and Punish that interests us in relation to these concerns is the section on Docile Bodies, and Foucault’s discussion of new problematisations of the productive capacities and possibilities of embodied labour emerging at the rise of rationalised capitalism. Foucault (1995, p. 135) opens his discussion of the docile body, as he often does, with a compelling account of a particular historical figure: in this case the ‘ideal figure of the soldier as it was still seen in the early seventeenth century’. This figure, according to the 17th century account cited by Foucault (1995, p. 135), is imagined as emerging, almost ready-made, from an existing social stratum or class:
The signs for recognizing those most suited to this profession are a lively, alert manner, an erect head, a taut stomach, broad shoulders, long arms, strong fingers, a small belly, thick thighs, slender legs and dry feet, because a man of such a figure could not fail to be strong and agile.

Foucault (1995, pp. 135–136) suggests that a century later – in an Ordnance from March 1764 – it is possible to discern a transformation, not so much in the emphasis on the body of the soldier, but in the ways in which it is imagined that the soldier’s body is something that can be made: ‘out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed’. In this shaping of the soldier:

Recruits become accustomed to ‘holding their heads high and erect; to standing upright, without bending the back, to sticking out the belly, throwing out the chest and throwing back the shoulders; and to help them acquire the habit, they are given the position while standing against a wall in such a way that the heels, the thighs, the waist and the shoulders touch it, as also do the backs of the hands, as one turns the arms outwards, without moving them away from the body ... Likewise they will be taught never to fix their eyes on the ground, but to look straight at those they pass ... to remain motionless until the order is given, without moving the head, the hands or the feet ... lastly to march with a bold step, with knee and ham taut, on the points of the feet, which should face outwards’.

With these sorts of developments, Foucault (1995, 136–8) argued that the human body ‘was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it’. In this process a “political anatomy”, which was also a “mechanics of power”, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines’. Understood in this way, discipline ‘produces subjected and practised bodies, “docile” bodies’. A docile body is a body ‘that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved’. As Foucault suggests, the emergence of a political economy of discipline was not the first time that the body had been subjected to scrutiny, supervision, training. Disciplinary mechanisms had long existed in such places as ‘monasteries, armies, workshops’. However, it was during the 17th and 18th centuries that discipline became generalised as a formula of rule.