Foucault’s early approach to the question of bodies and power is perhaps best known in his analysis of the body of the prisoner in *Discipline and Punish*. Many of us have read and reread this analysis, and tried to understand how power acts upon a body, but also how power comes to craft and form a body. The distinction between the two is vexing, since it seems that to the extent that power acts on a body, the body is anterior to power; and to the extent that power forms a body, the body is in some ways, or to some extent, made by power. One can find it clearly in Foucault’s own description. In *Discipline and Punish*, he writes, for instance, that ‘systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain “political economy” of the body.’ And when he attempts to situate the way the body is ‘directly involved in the political field’, he describes the process this way: ‘Power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.’

Here the body is described not merely in its docility, but in its vulnerability to coercion. It is ‘forced’ to do certain things, and it does them in accord with the demands made upon it. The force that compels the action does not remain anterior to the action itself. The action itself becomes forceful, and in ways that are not always in accord with the original aims of coercive power. ‘The body’, Foucault writes, ‘becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body’ (‘s’il est à la fois corps productif et corps assujetti’). The power imposed upon a body is to be understood as part of the ‘political technology of the body’, a technology which operates through a ‘micro-physics’ exercised in the form of a ‘strategy’. A strategy is not to be understood as a unilateral imposition of power, but precisely an operation of power that is at once productive, diffuse, various in its forms. In relation to this ‘strategy’, which, he makes clear, is not ‘appropriated’ by an anterior subject, one must discern ‘a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess’.

One can see here, in the description by which power is cast as a strategy which works on and through the body, that it takes place through at least two disclaimers, both of which have to do with the status of the subject. On the one hand, a strategy will not be ‘appropriated’, and so not be that which a subject takes on or take up. On the other hand, a strategy will be an operation of power that is not ‘possessed’ by a subject. So, the subject is left behind as the relation of power to the body emerges. But this abandonment, this negation, forms the necessary background for an understanding of what power is. We will not understand its distinctiveness if we are constrained by understanding power as what one possesses or that which one appropriates. It will be neither appropriation nor possession, and whatever it will be, will be distinct from at least these two capacities of a subject. Indeed, Foucault immediately offers an account of the agency of the body, which is meant to show how one might, in the context of a theory of power, disjoin the thinking of agency from the presupposition of the subject. Indeed, the theory of power which presupposes the subject once again introduces the notion of bodily agency he would have us accept, but it introduces it by way of a defining negation:

This power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them [prennent appui à leur tour sur les prises qu’il exerce sur eux].
Who struggles? who resists?

So, power is neither possessed nor not possessed by a subject, since here, in the moment in which a certain ‘they’ is invoked, the ‘they’ are both invested by power and in a struggle against it. It is apparently not something in ‘them’, an inherent feature, an abiding interiority, which is invested or which resists, but a feature of power itself, conceived as strategy. Foucault would have us reconceptualize both investment and resistance as different modalities of ‘a constant tension’ and ‘activity’ (‘toujours tendues, toujours en activité’), if not a ‘perpetual battle’.5 But who is the ‘they’ who struggle and resist? When we try to trace the referent for this ‘they’ – a pronoun and, hence, a personification – it vacillates between two referents: a set of persons and a set of power relations. On the one hand, it refers to ‘they’ who are said not to have power and who, ‘in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them’. And it refers, within the same set of sentences, to ‘relations’ that ‘go right down into the depths of society’ and that, a bit later, are given personified form: ‘they are not univocal; they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations’.6

The ‘they’ is thus at once a humanized referent – those who, in another vocabulary, are said not to have power and who, ‘in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them’. And it refers, within the same set of sentences, to ‘relations’ that ‘go right down into the depths of society’ and that, a bit later, are given personified form: ‘they are not univocal; they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations’.6

It assumes this agency at the same time that the referent to the subject and to the body becomes ambiguous, so that we cannot discern, even upon a close reading of Foucault’s texts, whether ‘they’ refers to persons or to relations of power. Under what conditions do activities of the kind that Foucault here seeks to describe presuppose a certain ambiguity between subjects and power? How are we to understand that ambiguity? Is there a new theory of the subject prefigured by this ‘they’ which emerges after the subject, understood in terms of appropriation and possession, has been set aside? If appropriation and possession are no longer the defining activities of the subject, and ‘activity’ itself has been redefined as constant, tense, embattled, transvaluative, is this because the new subject, the one who Foucault is trying to introduce to us, is one whose activity is invariably embodied?

When Foucault writes about the movements against incarceration in the nineteenth century, he reminds us that ‘they were revolts, at the level of the body, against the very body of the prison’.8 But by using the word ‘body’ twice, once to refer to people, and another time to refer to the institution, he makes clear that he is dealing with a conception of the body which is not restricted to the human subject. When he speaks about revolts against the prison system, he makes clear that ‘all these movements – and the innumerable discourses that the prison has given rise to since the early nineteenth century – have been about the body and material things’. The body is one such material thing, but so is the prison. But these are not exactly two forms of materiality. On the contrary, the very materiality of the prison has to be understood in terms of its strategic action upon and with the body; it is defined in relation to the body: ‘[t]he very materiality [of the prison environment is] an instrument and vector [vecteur] of power; it is this whole technology of power over the body that the technology of the “soul” – that of the educationalists, psychologists and psychiatrists – fails either to conceal or to compensate, for the simple reason that it is one of its tools’.9

So, it is not just that the movements of the nineteenth century are about the body and material things, as if these are two unrelated objects for such movements. It is rather that the very materiality of the prison is activated on the body of the prisoner, and through the technology of the soul. The soul is another matter, and we will return to it another time.10 But for now, consider that for Foucault the conception of agency which is being conceptualized beyond the theory of the subject is the activity of a strategy, where that strategy consists of the activation of the materiality
of the prison on and through, and in tension with, the materiality of the body. Materiality might be said, then, to diverge from itself, to redouble itself, to be at once institution and body, and to denote the process by which the one passes over into the other (or, indeed, the process by which both ‘institution’ and ‘body’ come into separate existence in and through this prior and conditioning divergence). And the distinction between the two is the site where the one makes a transition into the other. To say it is a ‘site’ is to offer a spatial metaphor for a temporal process, and so to derail the explanation from its point, but it would be equally wrong to eclipse the spatial through recourse to a purely temporal explanation. The disjunction between institution and body, and the passage between them it provides, are where agency is to be found.

Foucault calls this a moment, a site, a scene, using several words to describe this process, substituting a set of provisional names for a technical definition, conveying perhaps that no noun can capture the moment here. So this nexus provides the condition for power to become redirected, proliferated, altered, transvaluated. The introduction of the ‘nexus’, however, is not simply, or exclusively, a way of thinking about power. It is also a way of redefining the body. For the body is not a substance, a surface, an inert or inherently docile object; nor is it a set of internal drives which qualify it as the locus of rebellion and resistance. Understood as the nodal point, the nexus, this site of the application of power undergoes a redirection and, in this sense, is a certain kind of undergoing. So if the ‘nexus’ redefines power as that which is strategy, meaning activity and dispersion and transvaluation, so the ‘nexus’ redefines the body, as that which is also a kind of undergoing, the condition for a redirection, active, tense, embattled.

It would be one alternative to say that the nodal point is where or what the body is, and to seek recourse to an account of the body which would establish its capacity for resistance and show why it qualifies as this moment. But I think that would be a mistake (and it would reduce Foucault too quickly perhaps to Deleuze). For it seems to me that not only the subject but the body itself is being redefined, such that the body is not a substance, not a thing, not a set of drives, not a cauldron of resistant impulse, but precisely the site of transfer for power itself. Power happens to this body, but this body is also the occasion in which something unpredictable (and, hence, undialectical) happens to power; it is one site of its redirection, profusion and transvaluation. And it will not do to say it is passive in one respect, and active in another. Indeed to be such a site seems to be part of what Foucault means when he describes the body as ‘material’. To be material is not only to be obdurate and resistant to what works upon it, but to be the vector and instrument of a continued ‘working’. His language, his vacillations, his reformulations, compel us to rethink this relation again and again. So when Foucault says ‘the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body’,11 it is not that the body happens to be subjected and happens also to be productive, but that subjection and production are given ‘à la fois’, and quite fundamentally. The body in subjection becomes the occasion and condition of its productivity, where the latter is not finally separable from the former. These are not two bodies – one subjected, another productive – for the body is also the movement, the passage, between subjection and productivity. In this sense, it is the name given to the nexus of a transvaluation understood as an undergoing and also, perhaps ultimately for Foucault, a passion.

Who are we?

We can see in the above that Foucault is trying to understand how power can be thwarted at the site of its application, how a certain possibility of resistance and redirection takes the place of a mechanical effect. In the place of a theory of agency located in a subject, we are asked to understand, in different contexts, and through different venues, the way that power is compelled into a redirection by virtue of having the body as its vector and instrument. Indeed, the theory of the subject is backgrounded, if not fully declined, for the conceptual point at issue here is to think agency in the very relation between power and bodies, as the continued activity of power as it changes course, proliferates, becomes more diffuse, through taking material form.

Discipline and Punish was published in France in 1975; in 1981, Foucault offered the important essay ‘The Subject and Power’ to Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow as the Afterword to their book Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics.12 So it was six or seven years after the publication of the above analysis that he claimed,

the goal of my work during the last twenty years has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, … but to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made into subjects.13

Now we might wonder if Foucault is telling the truth about what his goal has been for the last twenty years. Or it may be that it only appears to him at the end
of twenty years, approximately 1961 to 1981, that this is what his goal has always been and that the Owl of Minerva is flying here at dusk. Of course, to come to believe this and to write this at the end of twenty years is not quite the same as having had that goal for twenty years. But perhaps we can also ask whether the analysis of bodies and power in *Discipline and Punish* is an effort to create a history of some of the modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made into subjects.

Foucault refers to subjection in *Discipline and Punish*, and this word, as is well known, carries a double meaning: *assujetissement* means both subjection (in the sense of subordination) and becoming a subject. It seems as well to contain the paradox of power as it both acts upon and activates a body. But if power is not the only mode by which a subject is produced, then perhaps the very notion of production, so central to Foucault’s early work, is not appropriate for what he seeks now to describe. When he asks, then, how human beings are ‘made’ into subjects, or how they are ‘crafted’ or, indeed, ‘craft themselves’, he is providing for accounts of construction which are not reducible to power in its productive effect. And if the subject now reenters the scene, or can become foregrounded within it, it is because the subject is made in times and places in which it is not conceived as a sovereign agent, a possessor of rights or power, an already constituted appropriating agency of the effects of power.

So, *Discipline and Punish* gives us bodies and power, and asks us to consider how power acts upon, and enacts, a body. But subsequently, indeed starting as early as 1978, Foucault begins to think again about the subject, and to reconsider the body in its mode as crafted and, indeed, in the service of a certain self-crafting.

In ‘The Subject and Power’, and in the volumes of *The History of Sexuality* after the first, Foucault turns away from power as a central theme. Is this because he ceases to think about power or because he begins to think about the problem he has identified as power in a new way, and under a new set of rubrics? How does a certain agency, a forceful action, indeed a revolt, emerge from the midst of constraint? How does the condition of being acted on by power produce an action which exceeds the passivity of the target? In ‘The Subject and Power’, Foucault makes clear that he thinks that the best way to analyse power is through taking resistance as a point of departure. Is he suggesting that we do not start with how power acts, but rather seek to know power by the resistance it compels? This new procedure does not, by the way, seem to be the methodological point of departure in *Discipline and Punish*, a text which has been criticized by some for not taking resistance seriously enough. In any case, Foucault writes that ‘another way to go further towards a new economy of power relations … consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point … it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies’. He then refers to forms of opposition which are conventionally understood as ‘anti-authority struggles’ and offers, as the ultimate characterization of these struggles, that they pose the question, ‘who are we?’ In opposing authoritative forms of power, we become unknowing about who we are. Why should this be the case? There is a recognition that power is involved in the very making of who we are and in constraining the ways in which we might refer to ourselves and ulti-
mately represent ourselves. Foucault makes this clear when he characterizes such movements as opposing ‘this form of power [that] applies itself to immediate, everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him’.  

This formulation starts to outline the very specific mechanism by which power acts on a subject and transforms a human being into a subject. But note that these are not the same. If power acts on a subject, then it seems as if the subject is there to be acted on prior to the acting of power. But if power produces a subject, then it seems that the production that power performs is the mechanism by which the subject comes into being. And whereas before we were told that power produces as one of its effects a resistance to productive power itself, we now focus on relatively recent historical formations of resistance or opposition – an even stronger word – to ways of producing the subject. So in this discussion the subject is not only produced by power, but objects to and counters the way in which it is produced by power.

In particular, the subject objects to the way in which power categorizes the subject, and attaches him to his own identity. What does this mean? What does it mean to be subject to power in such a way that power attaches you to your own identity? The answer seems to be partially illuminated by the next phrase that Foucault supplies: ‘power imposes a law of truth on the subject which he must recognize, and which others have to recognize in him’. If the word subjection (assujettissement) has two meanings, to subordinate, he distinguished between the one word, ‘subjection’, to denote both sides of that coin? And what has happened to the body? Is it still with us? Is he, then, suggesting that the only way to become a subject is through the process by which we are subordinated to power? Or is he suggesting that through our subordination to power we run the risk of becoming, indeed, something other than what power, as it were, had in mind for us?

I suggested above that we might understand Foucault as implicitly theorizing a kind of undergoing or passion when he queried how the body becomes the nexus for the redirection of power. In this context, it seems, we have another implicit theorization of passion, since the subject is not produced in a simply mechanical way, but power ‘attaches’ a subject to its own identity. Subjects appear to require this self-attachment, this process by which one becomes attached to one’s own subj ecthood. This is not precisely clarified by Foucault, and even the term ‘attachment’ does not receive an independent critical analysis. Indeed, I cannot help but wonder whether such an analysis would have led Foucault to consider Freud on the matter of self-preservation and, consequently, on self-destruction; and whether his refusal to subject the term to critical scrutiny was not, in part, a refusal to follow that path. What does seem to be at work here is perhaps a Spinozan presumption that every being seeks to persist in its own being, to develop an attachment, or cathexis, to what will further the cause of its own self-preservation and self-enhancement. But for Foucault, it is clear that one attaches to oneself through a norm, and so self-attachment is socially mediated; it is no immediate and transparent relation to the self. It is also contingent: we will become attached to ourselves through mediating norms, norms which give us back a sense of who we are, norms which will cultivate our investment in ourselves. But depending on what these norms are, we will be limited to that degree in how we might persist in who we are. What falls outside the norms will not, strictly speaking, be recognizable. And this does not mean that it is inconsequential; on the contrary, it is precisely that domain of ourselves which we live without recognizing, which we persist in through a sense of disavowal, that for which we have no vocabulary, but which we endure without quite knowing. This can be, clearly, a source of suffering. But it can be as well the sign of a certain distance from regulatory norms, and so also a site for new possibility.

Even though Foucault asks us to look away from a theory of power at this juncture, we can defy him gently and see that the theory of power becomes linked with norms of recognition. Power can only act upon a subject if it imposes norms of recognizability on that subject’s existence. Further, the subject must desire recognition, and so find him- or herself fundamentally attached to the categories which guarantee social existence. This desire for recognition constitutes, then, a specific vulnerability, if power imposes a law of truth that the subject is obliged to recognize. This means that one’s fundamental attachment to oneself, an attachment without which one cannot be, is constrained in advance by social norms, and that the
failure to conform to these norms puts at risk that capacity to sustain a sense of one’s enduring status as a subject.

It would appear from the above that social norms exercise full and final power here. But is there not a way to intervene upon the working of the law of truth? There appears to be a law of truth, part of the workings of the regime of knowledge, which imposes a truth upon a subject for whom there is no choice but to recognize this law of truth. But why is there no choice? Who is speaking here? Is it Foucault, or is it the ‘Law’ itself? The law of truth imposes a criterion by which recognition becomes possible. The subject is not recognizable without first conforming to the law of truth, and without recognition there is no subject – or so Foucault, in Hegelian fashion, seems to imply. Similarly, others ‘have’ to recognize this law of truth in him, because the law is what established the criterion of subjectionhood according to which the subject can be recognized at all. In order to be, we might say, we must become recognizable, but to challenge the norms by which recognition is conferred is, in some ways, to risk one’s very being, to become questionable in one’s ontology, to risk one’s very recognizability as a subject.

It also, however, means something more. If one is compelled to attach to oneself through the available norm, this means that to question the norm, to call for new norms, is to detach oneself from oneself, and so not only to cease to become self-identical, but to perform a certain operation on one’s passionate attachment to oneself. This means, in fact, suspending the narcissistic gratifications that conforming to the norm supplies, a satisfaction that comes from the moment of believing that the one whom one sees framed by the norm is identical to the one who is looking. Lacan tells us that this form of self-identification is always hallucinatory, and that there is no final approximation of the mirror-image, that narcissism is always derailed or, indeed, humiliated in this process. In an analogous way, we might say that conforming to the norm allows one to become, for the moment, fully recognizable, but, since the very norms at issue are constrained, one sees there, in the very conformity, the sign of one’s constraint. Indeed, perhaps we can speculate that the moment of resistance, of opposition, emerges precisely when we find ourselves attached to our constraint, and so constrained in our very attachment. To the extent that we question the promise of those norms which constrain our recognizability, we open the way for attachment itself to live in some less constrained way. But to for attachment to live in a less constrained way is for it to risk unrecognizability, and the various punishments which await those who do not conform to the social order.

Thus, Foucault, in ‘What is Critique?’ (1978) makes clear that the point of view of critique requires risking the suspension of one’s own ontological status. He asks, ‘“What, therefore, am I”, I who belong to this humanity, perhaps to this piece of it, at this point in time, at this instant of humanity which is subjected to the power of truth in general and truths in particular?’ Put another way: ‘what, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?’ And he clearly holds out for a possibility of a desire which exceeds the terms of recognizable identity when he asks, for instance, what one might become. This seems central to his task when he calls for the production of new subjectivities, for becoming something other than what we have been, and so for becoming itself as a way of life.

By 1983, he seems to be even more removed from the analysis of Discipline and Punish. He established his distance from the theory of power through a preterition, a rhetorical figure by which one mentions, sometimes emphatically, the very thing that one seeks to minimize:

I am no theoretician of power. The question of power does not interest me. When I did speak often about this question of power, I did so because the given political analysis of the phenomenon of power could not be properly given justice from the fine and small appearances which I wanted to recall, when I asked about the ‘dire-vrai’ about oneself. If I ‘tell the truth’ about myself, I constitute myself as subject by a certain number of relationships of power, which weigh upon me, and which weigh upon others ... I am working on the way the reflexivity of self to self has been established and which discourse of truth is tied to it.

Reflexivity enters, as it does with the later volumes of The History of Sexuality, to make the claim that it is the venue through which power creates and informs the subject. And whereas it may seem that the subject was vanquished in Discipline and Punish and perhaps more seriously still in the first volume of The History of Sexuality, only to be resurrected in the early 1980s, it is important to note that this is a very different subject that emerged. Similarly, one might suspect that the body ceases to provide the central way to think about power, but this would be, I believe, a mistaken reading. The subject who emerges here is still no sovereign, is still not one who is free to appropriate or not appropriate the effects of power that come its way, or which can be figured to possess or to lack basic rights or properties. This subject is more deeply constrained, and manifests its agency in the midst of this constraint. Moreover, Foucault has also told us,
and consistently so, that the very reflexivity through which power works is one of attachment and, hence, one of desire or passion of some kind. Power weighs upon that attachment to myself, and it weighs upon others, and it puts us in a common bind of undergoing that constraint, and of resisting its offer of recognizability and, hence, intelligibility. It also lays out for us the risks that becoming something which challenges recognizability entails. What must I be in order to be recognized, and what criterion holds sway here at the very condition of my own emergence? What is this ‘I’ who can ask about its recognizability? Does it not exceed the very terms it seeks to interrogate?

So whereas power acted upon the body, and the body was said to revolt against that coercion, now it seems that power acts upon the body, very specifically, in the very formulation of bodily passion in its self-persistence and knowability, the very modes by which we affectively seize upon or release a fundamental sense of identity. The body in some ways becomes passion in this reformulation, a passion for my own being which must pass through what is Other, the condition of my reflexivity in which I undergo those norms over which I have no choice. It is also, however, in that undergoing that I stand a chance of discovering some other way to be.

Although Foucault sometimes spoke as if one might simply opt out of identity, and create, as if through a simple transcendence, something new, a new set of subjectivities, some new forms of life, I would suggest that he had another conception of transformation at work. If we understand the norms by which we are obliged to recognize ourselves and others as those which work upon us, to which we must submit, then submission is one part of a social process by which recognizability is achieved. We are, as it were, worked upon, and only through being worked upon do we become a ‘we’. But matters do not need to end there. The conditions for revolt were also occasioned by submission, by the fact that human passion for self-persistence makes us vulnerable to those who promise us our bread. If we had no appetite, we would be free from coercion, but because we are from the start given over to what is outside us, submitting to the terms which give form to our existence, we are in this respect – and irreversibly – vulnerable to exploitation. The question that Foucault opens, though, is how desire might become produced beyond the norms of recognition, even as it makes a new demand for recognition. And here he seems to find the seeds of transformation in the life of a passion which lives and thrives at the borders of recognizability, which still has the limited freedom of not yet being false or true, which establishes a critical distance on the terms which decide our being.

Notes
This is the text of a talk delivered in Frankfurt, September 2001.

2. DP, p. 25. ‘Mais le corps est aussi directement plongé dans un champ politique; les rapports de pouvoir opère sur lui une prise immédiate; ils l’investissent, le marquent, le dressent, le suppliquent, l’astreignent à des travaux, l’obligent à des cérémonies, exigent de lui des signes’ (SP, p. 30).
3. DP, p. 26; SP, p. 31.
4. DP, p. 27; SP, pp. 31–2.
5. DP, p. 26; SP, p. 31.
6. DP, p. 27. ‘Enfin, elles ne sont pas univoques; elles définissent des points inombrables d’afrontement, des foyers d’instabilité dont chacun comporte ses risques de conflit, de luttes, et d’inversion au moins transitoire des rapports des forces’ (SP, p. 32).
7. This represents not only a misunderstanding of power, but a failure to understand that the ‘effect’ in Foucault is not the simple and unilateral consequence of a prior cause. ‘Effects’ do not stop being effected: they are incessant activities, in a Spinozistic sense. They do not, in this sense, presuppose power as a ‘cause’; on the contrary, they recast power as an activity of effectuation with no origin and no end.
8. DP, p. 30. ‘Il s’agissait bien d’une révolte, au niveau des corps, contre le corps même de la prison’, SP, p. 31.
9. Ibid.
10. See my discussion of this passage in Bodies that Matter, Routledge, New York, 1993, pp. 32–5.
11. DP, p. 26; SP, p. 31.
15. Ibid., p. 15.