

John Ross  
Dr. Powell  
Conferences  
18/20 April 2019

### Crucifixion Throughout Power Epochs

If you are keeping up with the Christian liturgical calendar, you'll notice tomorrow/yesterday is Good Friday. Christians have professed for two-thousand years that on Good Friday the bloody hands of God were penetrated by nails to a cross. The spiritual centerpiece of Christianity is the celebration of this, the Crucifixion, the moment when God extends salvation by means of his death. The social impact of this event is of paramount importance in the overall shaping of the West on literature, culture, and religion. This bizarre torture of a body as the central event to the major faith of the West is relevant to Michel Foucault's interest in the relationship between bodies and power. I argue the repetition of this story makes the Crucifixion a vestige of sovereign power throughout the different epochs of power. But as power festers and the story is retold and retold, the meanings of the Crucifixion begin to break down. By exploring the Crucifixion this paper will reveal that the Crucifixion's place is as a demonstration of sovereign power and how this story persists into later power epochs. The Crucifixion as an example of a story of sovereign power that extends to later epochs of power lends support to Foucault's view that different epochs of power are fluid and stories of mechanisms of previous epochs of power still prove relevant, if not highly relevant, for later epochs of power as demonstrated by the longevity of the retelling of the Crucifixion story.

First, I would like to state some presuppositions I am operating with. It is of note for the purposes of this paper that I will be functioning under the assumption that within examinations

of religion, Christianity is culturally inseparable from the European West whether or not Westerners are believers. This pattern of thought is derived specifically from Jean Luc-Nancy who writes in *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity* on page 34, for his purposes of exploring monotheism, it would be inauthentic to state an objective perspective in discussing monotheism that is separate from the cultural impact of Christianity. In a similar way, with this paper discussing the cultural and religious impact of the Crucifixion as a story, it is vital to observe the long-standing and ongoing cultural impact Christianity has had on the European West. This is not to understate the growing popularity and importance of secular atheism and atheistic criticisms of religion as well as the historic and ongoing importance of non-Christian faiths have on the West, but the purposes of this paper the focus will be on Christianity that maintains the cultural legacy that supersedes the influence of the others.

In connection with that presupposition, this paper does not intend to seek to argue for or against any theology from the Crucifixion but rather explore how those theological meanings have been shaped by (and then in turn shape) Western society within the context of the power epochs described by Foucault. Further, my analysis of Christ's crucifixion will be limited to the literary event of the Crucifixion in the canonical gospels and will not utilize archaeological evidence, religious texts that have been deemed non-canonical, or historical sources for context of death by cross, considering the limitations in scope of this paper. However, Biblical viewpoints on the cross will be discussed later with regards to disciplinary power because of their relevance on reading the Crucifixion. Stating this hopefully provides some context for my intentional presuppositions.

I am now going to relate the Crucifixion to sovereign power, disciplinary power and Biopolitics. They are all exercised, quoting Tom Frost, “over different areas of the population for different reasons in different ways.” (“Agamben’s Sovereign Legalization of Foucault”). Foucault describes these different epochs to describe the way power manifests. Further, when transitioning from one to another the described components associated with the different epochs of power are not disassembled and replaced; each of these three ways of assessing power do not vanish between epochs but remain ever present even as the new epochs develop. An event’s significance from a previous epoch of power is still relevant in a later epoch of powers. Especially considering this specific example, the Crucifixion, the death of Christ has meanings in the epoch of sovereign power that build and interact with different mechanisms of power throughout the evolution of power through the different epochs. With the emergence of disciplinary power, the descriptions of sovereign power at the Crucifixion as understood by readers of the Bible do not suddenly vanish. Although different meanings may be read into the Crucifixion, within the story’s text there remains a sustained demonstration of the longevity of mechanisms of power of the Crucifixion that extends beyond the epoch of sovereign power.

Frost describes that in discussing disciplinary power Foucault as not denying sovereignty and replacing it with another system but instead Foucault describes power epochs as fluctuating with sovereign power still being a possible system of power within other systems. The Crucifixion is a specific, clear example of a demonstration of one type of power, sovereign power, is still present in later systems of power.

Sovereign power is the demonstration of power by the sovereign over another individual. Considering this, I will compare Foucault’s example of the execution of Damians with the

physical description of the Crucifixion. Foucault's famous example paraded at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish* and also featured in its predecessor *The Punitive Society* lecture course, is the torture and execution of Damians for attempted regicide in a demonstration of sovereign power. In the brutal torture and execution, Damians goes through intense physical pain, with his bones broken and flesh penetrated, he is then quartered and then he is incinerated with his ashes tossed into the wind. Foucault describes sovereign power, "It exhibited the most atrocious and at the same time most ritual traces of its right of justice. The sovereign demonstrated what he could do with a man's body." (*Punitive Society* 11). Foucault is utilizing this example to suggest that the sovereign is in utter control. On the same page, Foucault describes Damians' death as "absolute security" for the Sovereign.

This atrocious act of justice displays the fundamental element to sovereign power: the public, theatrical display of torture against a body; what is of marvelous comparison is that the death of Jesus is nearly identical to Damians. Consider at the time of their deaths, Damians and Jesus are both functioning as enemies of the state in their defiance of the sovereign power and religious bureaucracy. Further, both have their bodies penetrated with Damians' chest torn open and Jesus' limbs being nailed to the cross (Luke 23:33). Both are executed and tortured gruesomely. Lastly, both allegedly disappear with Damians' ashes vanishing in the wind and Jesus' body not being found in his tomb. I mention this striking similarity to describe how deeply rooted the Crucifixion is in sovereign power.

The meanings of the Crucifixion begin to break down in different epochs of power. Keeping in consideration that the mechanisms of this power epoch's noteworthy model the

prison, as Foucault discusses, the prison form is utilized as the social form for disciplinary power (*The Punitive Society* 227).

Monitoring and correcting behavior has impacted the West's social fabric that encompasses the West's religion as well. With the emergence of disciplinary power, Christians attempt a reading with emphasis to make the Crucifixion as an instrument of panopticism. For example, with the development of religious universalism, one would believe all souls are observed and judged by God (Schwarz). However, this attempt to place the Crucifixion outside of sovereign power again breaks down because of the centrality of sovereign power as a necessity for reading the Crucifixion.

However, disciplinary power is not just panopticism. There is also a focus of time within disciplinary power for Foucault. Foucault describes clock time as the organization of the worker's time into a capitalist system (*Punitive Society* 72). The relationship between specific, scheduled time breaks down in the narrative of the Crucifixion as well, considering although the specific hour is listed for Jesus' death, time itself has become broken temporarily at Christ's death with it being dark outside despite being afternoon (Mark 15:33). Considering Foucault's analysis of clock time in disciplinary power is tied to the emergence of capitalism from the industrial revolution and the Crucifixion does not take place in capitalism there is another instance of the incompatibility of the Crucifixion with the epoch of disciplinary power. This demonstrates another mechanism of disciplinary power breaking down in an anarchistic attempt to frame the Crucifixion within disciplinary power, suggesting that the Crucifixion is firmly located within sovereign power.

In addition, the Crucifixion cannot be a story molded into disciplinary power because of the necessity of a single God. Ultimately, although the story of the Crucifixion can be bastardized and stretched in an attempt to justify instilling observation and trumping up Christianity's obsession with morality, it ultimately falls short internally because there is no panoptic apparatus in the Crucifixion narrative: the cross is not a guard tower and the execution is not on a schedule. There is also not a sense of observation instilled in the believers like there is for the guards and the prisoners because in the case of disciplinary power there is not a centralized observer, instead it is an instilled feeling of observation that leads to certain patterns of behavior. Instead for the Christian, God is the central observer of whom is to be compared to the mechanisms of sovereign power more than the mechanisms of disciplinary power. Christianity's monotheism is what prevents the Crucifixion into transitioning into a story about disciplinary power.

Moving on now to Biopolitics, there is a incompatibility similar to disciplinary power of understanding of the Crucifixion from the epoch of power Foucault briefly addresses as Biopolitics. Foucault, in the course summary of *the Birth of Biopolitics*, defines biopolitics as "...the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birth rate, life expectancy, race..." (317). So while the event of the Crucifixion of Christ does not occur in the power epoch of Biopolitics, one might consider that the Crucifixion still possesses spiritual meaning during this epoch. While this is true, that one could evaluate the death of Christ on a cross as a fundamental cultural event is of relevance to the spiritual and psychological well being of a population, that is not the same thing as producing

a read of the Crucifixion from the purview of Biopolitics. Biopolitics' concern with a population makes a reading of the Crucifixion for Biopolitics impossible because there is not a population on the cross. The descriptions around the epoch of power that is Biopolitics cannot come to examine the Crucifixion. This suggests that the Crucifixion, from the era of sovereign power, is so far removed from Biopolitics because Biopolitics is concerned with a different way power manifests itself, which is upon populations not from the Sovereign to the individual.

But the Crucifixion still prevails as a story told in the power epoch of Biopolitics. This takes on two forms. Chiefly, the story of the Crucifixion is told again and again, and the context of sovereign power is understood by the listeners. From one power epoch to the next, the meanings and contexts are not entirely lost, but they might lose context. For example, it is difficult for the average Christian to understand the political scope Rome without some study: that meaning is no longer as inherent, it has to be uncovered. Next, the Crucifixion, as a story of sovereignty, appeals to populations and while the context may break down in later power epochs, there are examples in Biopolitics of populations responding in significant ways to the Crucifixion. For example, just as it was impossible for Paul to separate the suffering soul from the suffering body (Rivera 30-31), Foucault explains on page 206 from *Security, Territory, and Population* that the asceticism of Christians is inseparable from the asceticism of Christ. So there are populations in the epoch of Biopolitics utilizing stories from sovereign power to live in ways from the Crucifixion. That being said, the Crucifixion is not a story of Biopolitics.

As is already seen, the Crucifixion begins to break down with the practices shifting and evolving during the different epochs of power. However, each of these different demonstrations of different sets of mechanisms of power do operate with its different realms of meanings. The

meanings of personal salvation from the Crucifixion focused from sovereign power begin to become less understandable with the different categories of power like Biopolitics. At the same time, the meanings of sovereign power are not disrupted for populations in Biopolitics.

To summarize, the Crucifixion, as a literary event, is conceived under sovereign power. When populations move into biopolitics and disciplinary power the original story of the Crucifixion breaks down and although molded by the new epochs of power, fundamentally has a disconnect from the understanding of sovereign power present in the story of the Crucifixion. Sovereignty is a central prerequisite to unfolding the meaning of the Crucifixion. Yet what is significant is that the Crucifixion is not unreadable to later epochs of power. Even further, for many people, the Christians, the story is still meaningful. A preliminary conclusion to draw is the impact of these different epochs of power all distinctly shift readings of the Crucifixion and mold the pinnacle of the Christian religion to their cultural context with ideas around different modes of power.

Realizing there are stories that clearly demonstrate former epochs of power being relevant in later epochs of power is significant for Foucault's project because it demonstrates the flexibility of the different epochs and how the mechanisms of power in previous epochs are preserved and easily recognizable in later epochs. In some areas, it is easy to read Foucault as if there are clear distinctions between different epochs of power. Such as on page 240 of the *Punitive Society* Foucault discusses how power transitions from a visible, ritual form of sovereign power into power being demonstrated in a series of disciplinary techniques. This is significant because the story of the Crucifixion does not disappear or lose its meaning as a story of sovereign power in Biopolitics or disciplinary power.



A more substantial but open-ended conclusion to discuss, that was touched on earlier regarding the fluidity of the power epochs, is that in long standing cultural events such as the Crucifixion, the social, cultural, and religious meanings that come to be understood from these events internal to the power epochs they arise in do not vanish in the power epochs that follow them. Foucault's timelines of different power epochs have numerous inconsistencies throughout his work (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 84). With the emergence of new epochs of power, people tell and retell the Crucifixion, a story so deeply rooted in sovereign power that produce these different readings from these different sets of mechanisms from previous epochs retold in different epochs. Old stories, old meanings and definitions of power are restated in different epochs of power and the old mechanisms of power are brought to the forefront again of the believers' understandings of the world. Although stories that are being created in this time period and new cultural practices more clearly reflect the current dominant mechanisms of power that can be labelled as the dominant power epoch, ongoing stories from the past emerge with their meanings already being carried over. Especially in a religious tradition, where meanings of stories are rehashed regularly, the religious and cultural significance of the Crucifixion of its original context and the religious and cultural meanings built around it as the tradition continues and power epochs shape it, become apparent again and again. What long standing stories like the Crucifixion are able to demonstrate in exploring its different meanings in sovereign power, disciplinary power, and Biopolitics provide to the Foucauldian, is support that power epochs do not crush or suppress previous power epochs and erase the meanings and understandings that emerge from these eras. Rather, while power epochs may supercede former ones with the

mechanisms of the previous power epochs are still present and alive in different time periods and this is exposed by the retelling of older stories and dated cultural practices.

Work Cited

- Frost, Tom. "Agamben's Sovereign Legalization of Foucault." *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 1 July 2010.  
[https://advance-lexis-com.marshall.idm.oclc.org/api/document?collection=analytical-materials&id=urn:contentItem:5C0F-TR80-0112-236C-00000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.marshall.idm.oclc.org/api/document?collection=analytical-materials&id=urn:contentItem:5C0F-TR80-0112-236C-00000-00&context=1516831).  
 Accessed November 26, 2018.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1972-1973*. Edited by Bernard E. Harcourt. Translated by Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Foucault, Michel. *Security, Territory, and Population. Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977-1978*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978-1979*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Foucault, Michel. *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1979-1980 and Oedipal Knowledge*. Edited by Michael Senellart et al. Translated by Graham Burchell, Picador, 2014.
- MacKendrick, Karmen. *Word Made Skin : Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh*, Fordham University Press, 2004. ProQuest Ebook Central,  
<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.marshall.idm.oclc.org/lib/marshall-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3239728>.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Dis-Enclosure: the Deconstruction of Christianity*. Translated by Bettina Bergo et al., Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Rivera, Mayra. *Poetics of the Flesh*. Duke University Press, 2015.
- Schwarz, Hans. "Universalism." *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Ian A. McFarland, et al., Cambridge University Press, 1st edition, 2011. *Credo Reference*,  
<https://marshall.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/cupdct/universalism/0?institutionId=3309>. Accessed 27 Nov. 2018.