

What is a Dispositif?

The concept of "dispositif" is best known as a key term in late Foucault that first appeared in his *History of Sexuality*, Volume 1 (1976) to replace the use of "discursive formation," which for Foucault was restricted to the analysis of the statement in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969). This later substitution of terms had to embrace non-linguistic, particularly visual and spatial arrangements, or in Foucault's own terms, "the said as much as the unsaid." However, Foucault never properly defined his understanding of dispositif, and the term's breadth and ambiguity explains the persistence of the question "What is a dispositif?" in contemporary theory. In 1988 and in 2006, respectively, Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben each addressed this term in essays both titled with that very question. Both philosophers agreed that the term refers to the heterogeneous mechanisms of "capturing" and "transforming" living beings into subjects in the process of which the "dimension of power" plays a crucial role. They also emphasized the plurality of these "mechanisms," thus referring not to a singular dispositif, but to the "multilinear ensemble." Both Deleuze and Agamben preferred to remain in the haven of abstraction rather than going through the pains of a concrete analysis of the workings of such mechanisms. The only example given by Agamben (the alienating power of mobile phones) bears the pitfalls of technological determinism. In this case, dispositif becomes a kind of all-embracing network of oppressive "social machines" intermingled with technophobic fantasy - a kind of Matrix - which an individual is only able to evade. However, the term "ideology" is significantly absent from these exegeses.

At the same time, concepts are not defined by propositions and do not exist in dictionaries. They are defined by "statements," and statements can appear suddenly to change the meaning of a concept, as in the case of the concept of the apparatus which is suddenly redefined by a new term Foucault introduces, which is dispositif, which submits the concept of apparatus to a sudden reversal between interior and exterior, since apparatuses will suddenly be found to be internal to dispositifs, but without becoming a form of interiority. In this sense of reversal, I would argue that the exact status of Foucault's term "dispositif" is that of a neologism. In other words, he invented the term precisely to: 1. avoid using another term that was already coupled to the term *appareil* (i.e., "machine"), and; 2. to invest the term with a new and more general sense that would be the basis for his analysis and further amplification of what the term would eventually come to designate—but only as a result of further demonstration that his subsequent works would perform. Of course, someone might immediately object to my classification of neologism for a word that already existed in the French lexicon and thus already has a definite semantic content and etymological history; however, the fact that a word exists in a language does not convey its usage, the frequency of its uses, and in what contexts the word is employed. Given the fact that the word was not employed previously in the same context as the term *appareil*, the introduction of the term into the conceptual discussion at this point would give Foucault the distinctive advantage to also redefine its conceptual cousin as well, which he does. Therefore, since words are not defined in isolation, but in the context of other terms that they are related or opposed to (synonyms, antonyms), or serve as qualifiers, then dispositif cannot be defined apart or outside the history of statements that define the term *appareil* (and of course, now, as a result of Foucault's neologism, *visa versa*). In any case, as Foucault already argues in the *Archeology of Knowledge*, words only occur in statements, and new statements that define a term's meaning appear in the present and can suddenly transform the entire sense of what the statement designates. This is how I would also understand the statement, or rather the question, "What is an apparatus?" after Foucault's usage of the term beginning in 1975.

Concerning the relationship to its conceptual cousin, apparatus, or machine, why does Foucault insist on the heterogeneity of assemblage of elements except to define an order that non longer can be determined mechanistically as parts of a machine. This is why I have argued above that Foucault selects the term “dispositif” in part to avoid using other terms that are already coupled with the concept of the apparatus, which are machine, structure, system, or organism. Each of these forms require a homogenous space and determines the elements of parts of the ensemble. There is no structure, for example, in which all the elements that supposedly belong to the structure would be absolutely heterogenous to one another; likewise, there is no machine that is composed of absolutely heterogenous parts. In each case, the elements would be external to the form of a structure or the function of a machine, and there would be no homogenous and interior relation (i.e., the elements would not belong to the structure, the parts would not belong to the machine). And yet, is this exteriority itself a new form of relation itself, without becoming yet again another structure? And yet, this seems to be what Foucault is suggesting by the term dispositif.

If we simply define a dispositif as a general strategy according to Foucault’s own definition—“I said that the dispositive is by nature essentially strategic”—then what is a strategy. A strategy can be defined as a line of force that is exterior to the elements but assembles them in a certain order and according to a certain end. In economy as in war, for example, ‘the multiple relations of force which are formed and operate in the apparatuses (appareils) of production,’ there is a ‘general line of force which traverses local battles and links them together.’ In order to illustrate this, let us think of the difference between war and battle. A battle is a finite instance that reproduces the general conflict, as well as the terms and subjects of this conflict. But the outcome of the battle does not necessarily determine the end of the war; the battle moves the war further along, extends the process, until the next instance. The winner and the loser will assess the outcome of the battle as part of a general strategy to win the war, but the war is not over until the conditions of reproduction on one side are reduced to a point where one can no longer go on fighting. In choosing the term dispositif, Foucault disregards the mechanistic definition of an apparatus and chooses instead its secondary meaning: the ensemble of military pieces disposed according to a strategic plan. What is the general plan except the subjection of one force by another force. Except, for Foucault, what is new is the strategy of subjection, which occurs not through repression or cancellation of the force, but rather by incitement, provocation, intensification, and seduction. It is here that Foucault articulates the new strategies of power that are essentially vitalist and creative; moreover, in perpetuating this strategy across and through institutions and concrete individuals, this new order brings together formerly heterogenous terms and causes them to be linked together, and even is responsible for creating or inventing new terms, as in new subjections.

In a certain sense, the question “what is a dispositif?” and all the discussion this question has created in the history of Foucault scholarship—but also, I will recall, in the history of Marxism and Althusserian scholarship as well—is perhaps a modern exemplary of the scholastic *petitio principii*, since an apparatus can be easily defined in whatever contemporary lexicon one chooses as “a device” that literally causes (or “makes ready”) something to begin to appear—sexuality, power, the state, God, etc. In the last definition, before departing from this discourse on the little iota, I have placed a greater emphasis on the nature of the appearance, emphasizing the point of emergence, the becoming visible, or the beginning to appear instead of an indefinite and infinite appearance. This declension of appearance, in fact, corresponds to the temporality of the French verb that is derived from the Latin *appāreŕscō*. Therefore, a dispositif now must be understood as a device that specifically causes something “to begin to appear,” and perhaps this gives the term a more historical and less ontologically determined, as if the nature of power itself undergoes a change. It is crucial to note that later in the lecture on security Foucault rejects any serialization of these dispositifs in the sense of a paradigmatic change in the nature of power itself. As Foucault himself comments in *Sécurité, territoire, population*, ‘you do not at all have a series in which the

elements are going to succeed one another, those which appear making the preceding ones disappear. There is not the age of the legal, the age of the disciplinary, the age of security.' Therefore, according to the same logic, there is not an age of biopower either.¹

Returning to our discussion, a second problem with Althusser's concept of apparatus is that he has to resort to a reproduction of the term itself to define its order or principle, which is that of a machine. The apparatus is already determined as part of a more general order to which its function is subordinated, the mode of production. However, this leads to a tautology in the concept itself, which he can resolve only by describing certain state-apparatuses as repressive, directly subjecting the body to power or force (the police, the prison, the military), and others as defined as ideological, whose form of subjection is imaginary, producing in the consciousness of the subject a correlate of the subjected body in the form of an identity, which Foucault refers to later as a kind of "autonomous docility." (D&P, 169). It is this concept of the apparatus that is employed in *Discipline and Punish*, which is early on taken from Marx and defined as a homogenous assemblage or "machine." But it is also important to point out that this is where the notion of a general strategy of warfare that is also applied to populations and to the individual body through the technique of politics and the economic division of labour first appears as well. Here, Foucault's theory of machine is drawn more from Canguilhem, who in turn finds it first in Descartes; as Canguilhem argues, the emergence of Capitalism is not the result of the fixed ratio of labor time as it is the gradual mechanization of the different parts of labour into a machine. It is only on the basis of this prior mechanization that the total process can be standardized, numerically determined--I.e., the parts or elements must already be made disposable to being standardized, they must be homogenized. The soul cannot move the body unless the body is already predisposed to movement. An army, which is assembled from heterogenous elements, cannot move as one body unless they are already disposed to be made from the same mettle. As Foucault writes:

Hence the need to find a whole calculated practice of individual and collective dispositions, movements of groups or isolated elements, changes of position, of movement from one disposition to another; in short, the need to invent a machinery whose principle would no longer be the mobile or immobile mass, but a geometry of divisible segments whose basic unity was the mobile soldier with his rifle; 12 and, no doubt, below the soldier himself, the minimal gestures, the elementary stages of actions, the fragments of spaces occupied or traversed. The same problems arose when it was a question of constituting a productive force whose effect had to be superior to the sum of elementary forces that composed it: "The combined working-day produces, relatively to an equal sum of working-days, a greater quantity of use-values, and, consequently, diminishes the labour-time necessary for the production of a given useful effect. Whether the combined working-day, in a given case, acquires this increased productive power, because it heightens the mechanical force of labour, or extends its sphere of action over a greater space, or contracts the field of production relatively to the scale of production, or at the critical moment sets large masses of labour to work ... the special productive power of the combined working-day is, under all circumstances, the social productive power of labour, or the productive power of social labour. This power is due to cooperation itself (Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 311- 12). On several occasions, Marx stresses the analogy between the problems of the division of labour and those of military tactics. For example: 'Just as the offensive power of a squadron of cavalry, or the defensive power of a regiment of infantry, is essentially different from the sum of the offensive or defensive powers of the individual cavalry or infantry soldiers taken separately, so the sum total of the mechanical forces exerted by isolated workmen differs from the social force that is developed, when many

¹ Michel Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France, 1977-1978* (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2004), 10.

hands take part simultaneously in one and the same undivided operation' (Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 308). Thus a new demand appears to which discipline must respond: to construct a machine whose effect will be maximized by the concerted articulation of the elementary parts of which it is composed. Discipline is no longer simply an art of distributing bodies, of extracting time from them and accumulating it, but of composing forces in order to obtain an efficient machine.

Later, in the same argument, Foucault summarizes this analogy in a manner that will continue to inform the thesis that in the modern period politics becomes increasingly made up of strategies and tactics that are derived from the technologies of war. Thus,

It may be that war as strategy is a continuation of politics. But it must not be forgotten that 'politics' has been conceived as a continuation, if not exactly and directly of war, at least of the military model as a fundamental means of preventing civil disorder. Politics, as a technique of internal peace and order, sought to implement the mechanism of the perfect army, of the disciplined mass, of the docile, useful troop, of the regiment in camp and in the field, on manoeuvres and on exercises. In the great eighteenth-century states, the army guaranteed civil peace no doubt because it was a real force, an ever-threatening sword, but also because it was a technique and a body of knowledge that could project their schema over the social body. If there is a politics-war series that passes through strategy, there is an army-politics series that passes through tactics. It is strategy that makes it possible to understand warfare as a way of conducting politics between states; it is tactics that makes it possible to understand the army as a principle for maintaining the absence of warfare in civil society. The classical age saw the birth of the great political and military strategy by which nations confronted each other's economic and demographic forces; but it also saw the birth of meticulous military and political tactics by which the control of bodies and individual forces was exercised within states. The 'militaire' – the military institution, military science, the militaire himself, so different from what was formerly characterized by the term 'homme de guerre' – was specified, during this period, at the point of junction between war and the noise of battle on the one hand, and order and silence, subservient to peace, on the other. Historians of ideas usually attribute the dream of a perfect society to the philosophers and jurists of the eighteenth century; but there was also a military dream of society; its fundamental reference was not to the state of nature, but to the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine, not to the primal social contract, but to permanent coercions, not to fundamental rights, but to indefinitely progressive forms of training, not to the general will but to automatic docility.

It is here we find the convergence of two techniques that will later be employed to define the dual object of biopolitical order—strategy directed at the population or in the war between populations; a tactic directed at the level of the individual body, or unit of measurement. Likewise this distinction between overall strategy of biopolitical calculation and knowledge and the concrete tactics and various techniques invented to shape and condition the body, determine the nexus of the two orderings or dispositions of general strategies of control and individual techniques, or the tactics of power.

Finally, in response to the question of Foucault's resistance to a Marxist theory of the State, which will be important for understanding why Foucault does not follow Althusser's concept of the apparatus, we first need to turn to Canguilhem's discovery of this transformation from his 1952 article "Machine and organism," which directly influenced Foucault's understanding of the distinction between a *dispositif* and an apparatus. For the purpose of defining these terms in Foucault's usage, I will depend upon a very fine analysis given by Matteo Pasquinelli in which he traces the genealogy explicitly through Foucault's inheritance of the term *dispositif* from the biology of Georges Canguilhem (who, as Pasquinelli shows, owes his usage in some respects from Goldstein, the 20th century neurologist). As Pasquinelli observes, in

Canguilhem's earlier article we have the first known usage of the term "dispositif" to denote simply the idea of mechanism applied in modern biology. According to this definition, Canguilhem writes: "With the exception of vertebrates, living beings and their forms rarely display to the scrupulous observer devices [dispositifs] that could evoke the idea of a mechanism, in the sense given to this term by scientists" (76). Moreover, the second definition that Canguilhem gives to the term is simply that of a tool that is invented or fabricated to act on nature, as described by modern ethnographers, but also he points out that the rationalization of techniques to explain the invention of specific tools (or machines) seems "to forget the irrational origin of machines themselves" (95). This will lead to a crucial point that I will return later on: it is the innate tendency to rationalize the idea of mechanism, as Descartes did, as a knowledge that is particular to the subject of Man and not a universal biological phenomenon that is already found to be latent in all organisms, which anthropomorphizes the natural relation between machine and organism in the form of a rupture or discontinuity that the form of rationalization of the idea of mechanism modern science first introduces. In fact, as Canguilhem demonstrates many times in this brief article, it is the construction of machines that is actually chronologically and logically anterior to any technical knowledge that seeks to appropriate the machine (tool) in order to inform it certain specific ends, or to multiply its effects (including its powers over living beings), since "every technique essentially and positively includes a vital originality irreducible to rationalization. Consequently, for Canguilhem, the image of vital originality might be better illustrated by the partly irrational origins of some of the machines invented by Leonardo Di Vinci, which Freud recounts in his psychoanalytic study, than by Descartes' image of God as the watchmaker, where we find the idea of mechanism completely rationalized.

Canguilhem's image of this originality echoes, intentionally perhaps, Heidegger's question concerning the origin of the work of art that appears in German two years beforehand. As I will argue concerning Foucault's adaptation of Canguilhem's earlier observation to his understanding of the techniques of power and sexuality, just as the construction of certain machines are before the knowledge of techniques that employ them, the invention of dispositifs is prior to knowledge of the effect or product, and in some ways can be compared to the function responsible for creation in the work of art, which cannot be completely known beforehand, that is to say, rationalized as the principle of the creation. A much simpler way of putting this is that the idea of mechanism is based on the construction of actual machines, and not the other way around; the knowledge employed in the construction of machines is not the same as the form of rationalization that is applied to this vital originality later on, whether this concerns the work of art or in technology. Therefore, "while it may be said that, in substituting mechanism for the organism, Descartes effaces teleology from life, but he does so only in appearance, for he reassembles it, in its entirety, as his point of departure" (86). Another way of putting this is that Descartes inscribed the current idea mechanism within an already preexisting model of the living as the animal-machine (i.e., "he consciously rationalized the vital notion of life" in the principle of God). Here is perhaps Canguilhem's greatest critique of the Cartesian dispositif--I use this term intentionally--that is contained in two parts. If God is both the efficient and final cause of the mechanism of life, then he already contains infinite knowledge concerning the evolutionary path of future mechanisms and one only needs to refer to this principle in rectifying the most current mechanistic understanding with the mind of God, who functions as its first principle. In other words, Descartes first institutes the idea of mechanism in the living, in the same way that Marx institutes the updated idea of mechanism in the State, and finally, in the way that Althusser institutes the most current definition of mechanism in the theory of the Subject, which is to say a structure with a central subject. In some ways, this procedure functions no differently than updating the software of the Central subject according to the idea of its function to function categorically for all other elements. But this leads to the most trenchant criticism, which reintroduces a fundamental distinction between technological machines and living machines, is that the former require efficient causes. Machines do not create other machines, but require a human agency to function as the efficient cause. This leads directly to Foucault's adaptation of this insight to determine the history of dispositif as something that is artificial, requiring constant reinvention, adaptation, correction, new techniques and tactics, but it is also

vulnerable to sudden reversals, appropriation, counter-strategy by social relations. Thus, like the process that defines living itself through the encounter with the environment in an agnostic struggle, the evolutionary path of any *dispositif* is open to the moments of rupture and discontinuity, at least, with the constant and sudden appearance of new elements and techniques as part of a generalized struggle to maintain consistency and unity. Thus, the epistemology of mechanism is never given once and for all, and the concept of the *dispositif* is thus not established on either a given understanding of *techne*, nor upon the most recent image of technology.

According to Pasquinelli, this distinction functions in a “pivotal” manner in Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary organization from this point onward, and evinces the influence of Canguilhem’s usage of the *dispositif* to address the function in biology and sociology of the norm, which does not take on a mechanistic determination, but rather a biological one, that of the organism. Consequently, here we also see the precise point of the emergence and separation between juridical mechanisms and biopolitical dispositions in Foucault’s analysis of how power is organized no longer by an apparatus or infrastructure of relations with one central and controlling mechanism (the state), but rather in a kind of multiple array of techniques and *dispositifs*. As Pasquinelli observes, according to this technical distinction, which Foucault employs also as a lever to pry away the understanding of power from its overtly mechanistic, political materialist, and even structuralist determination, the concept of *dispositif* becomes not just a positive and heterogeneous agency of the law or the sovereign Subject, but functions as a normative autonomous agent. Moreover, it is here that biological normalization is substituted for mechanical causality in order to describe how power functions through the norm and the process of normalization as Canguilhem described in terms of the conflict of the organism and its environment and the function of anomaly and norm as two powers that define this relation as one of constant conflict. For example, through illness the organism is attempting to invent a new norm that will be able to maintain its integrity and restore balance in its relation to its environment—both interior and exterior. By the way, this principle of norm bears a strong resemblance to Freud’s definition of the pleasure principle, whose goal is homeostasis.

At the same time, we should be cautious in merely substituting one metaphor or analogy for another, a biological one for a mechanical one, or even in producing an ontological version of one metaphor merely supplanting the other. Here we can see why there have been so many misreadings of Foucault around the term “biopower,” since these readings have too often assumed that power no longer functions or occurs through its disciplinary mechanism (for example, the panoptic mechanism), and has been replaced wholesale by a powerful new paradigm that simply operates according to another analogy, the organism, and by means of a different kind of energy, biological energy or *bios*. Here, let us return to the earlier statement quoted above, which I take on Pasquinelli’s word marks the first instance where Foucault introduces this pivotal distinction. What does he say exactly? He says that this year, instead of the mechanics of the disciplinary apparatus, I will be looking at the “effects of normalization,” which are defined as the effective function of various *dispositifs*. This does not imply that organism replaces mechanism, that biopower replaces discipline, but that both co-exist in a total social organization and operate according to different principles that both separate them and, at the same time, them in a “typical form of governmentality.” In other words, *dispositifs* are simply “the other side of juridical and political structures of representation and is the condition of their functioning and effectiveness” If the technique of subjection functions more effectively as a form of subjectification, by which concrete individuals are thereby transformed into subjects, the *dispositif* becomes typical, ordinary, common, and almost universal as a power that everyone in the social field possesses and is determined by. It is here again we see Foucault’s favorite pair of conceptual terms for the conditions of emergence of particular *dispositifs*—dispersion and generality.