

“THE *DISPOSITIF* AND THE REMNANTS”

Notes for a discussion

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From the Seventies onwards the research of Michel Foucault has increasingly explored the relationship between knowledge, power and subjectification. He has frequently used the notion of *dispositif* to account for this relationship. As with other concepts, the “*dispositif*” was often put to work without a clear definition of its meaning and function. In 1977 a direct and precise question provided the occasion for Foucault to clarify in a systematic manner what he intended with, and how he used, this notion. The *dispositif* represents an heterogeneous set of elements, discursive or not, settling down in texts and practices, even minute and marginal ones. It has a strategic nature, which implies that it is “always inscribed in a power game and, at the same time, always linked to particular limits of knowledge”. The *dispositif* represents at the same time the space in which a discourse is produced and takes effect and what strategically links together an heterogeneous ensemble of practices and, furthermore, what enables the sorting out between ‘saying-the-truth’ and ‘saying-the-false’. Its strategic nature implies the necessity for a continuous adjustment that unceasingly produces effects. One of the effects of this movement is constituted of classifications, that produce and give visibility to people and objects, permitting to arrange and to govern them. For Paul Rabinow, for example, a *dispositif* is characterized by a “politics of strategically chosen targets, an articulation of technologies aimed at first specifying (and to that extent creating) those targets and then controlling (distributing and regulating) them”. These peculiar targets are what Ian Hacking calls “moving targets”, that are aware of, and react to, the classification itself. This produce a continuous change in the *dispositif* with the aim of capturing, subjecting and controlling exactly what avoids capture. Foucault himself had repeatedly underlined the fact that is precisely the residue, what escapes classification – the unclassifiable –, that gives visibility to the limits of every disciplinary power and of every *dispositif* of government, and that, simultaneously, set in motion additional systems and mechanisms, triggering a transformation of the *dispositif* in order to produce new subjects and to subject them to control and regulation.

This is evident in analyzing “security” policies and practices, and more than ever in the discursive production and justification of technologies and tools for the surveillance and control of particular individuals, groups and populations, of peculiar ‘kinds of people’. We can look at them as a *dispositif* of surveillance, control and subjection of bothersome and dangerous people. A *dispositif* consisting of experts (who produce discourses that are scientifically acceptable), knowledge (produced and shared both by the experts and the people), institutions (that produce “reputation” for these experts and give visibility to their claims), techniques and machineries (for example databases and statistical procedures), classifications (that gives “reality” to particular kinds of people), people (that are classified and, somehow, react to classifications). We can see it at work, for example, in the introduction and integration of police databases, such as the national DNA databanks. In this case it is especially interesting to observe how specific (scientific and technical) knowledge enters in relation with particular powers, producing specific games of truth that inscribe into the real both these ‘kinds of people’ and the rationality of the instruments produced and used to govern, regulate and control them. Here, it is not so much a matter of making an exegesis of the foucauldian idea of *dispositif*, but to put it to work as an instrument useful to produce knowledge and a critique of the societies we are living in.