

The Struggle between the Dharma Bums and the Police: A Foucauldian Reading of The Dharma Bums

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Received: 19/10/2021
Accepted: 21/01/2022
Published: 01/03/2022

Volume: 3 Issue: 2

How to cite this paper: Sadr, S., & Asadi Amjad, F. (2022). The Struggle between the Dharma Bums and the Police: A Foucauldian Reading of The Dharma Bums. Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature, 3(2), 15-19
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v3i2.131>

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine and analyze the novel The Dharma Bums by Jack Kerouac based on the political theory of Michel Foucault. This semi-fictional account is the story of search for the original experience and enlightenment and introduces the character of Gary Snyder as Japhy Ryder who is a poet, critical thinker, philosopher and political radical, and Ray Smith, the alter ego of Jack Kerouac himself. The main focus would be on Foucault's conceptions of power, power relations, institutions, normalization, and surveillance. This study will also seek to provide a true understanding of the life and times of Jack Kerouac. Moreover, it represents the cultural, political, and historical background based on which Kerouac had written his work. Kerouac's novel represents the spirit of the age of a people who sought change, difference, and disobedience; the main characters are antiheroes who challenge their prisonlike structure of the society. In contrast, the government has the upper hand by means of its distinct and overlapping institutions that not only neutralize such acts or resistances but make normal and ordinary those individuals who were themselves the promoters and examples of abnormality.

Keywords: Resistance, Institutions, Normalization, Surveillance, Power relations

1. Introduction

This study puts Foucault in direct relation to American context to look into the question of freedom in America and the degree which writers have found out about this big lie in American history. Mixing culture, society, politics, context, and history with Foucault's political philosophy will end up offering a kind of analysis which will shed up much brighter light of the real system operating behind the curtain of America's domestic politics.

The Dharma Bums (2006) has been seen by many as a novel that expresses the spirit of an age that wanted to revolutionize the values in making people aware of the suppression of the American society. The Dharma Bums exhibits a hatred toward tradition and even modernity that seeks to restrict human beings' freedom and make them abnormal individuals. Despite the fact that the lives of bums and travelers depicted in the novel seem to try to manifest the revolutionary way of life led by Kerouac, other Beat Generation members, and the people they had inspired, there exists another much deeper level of meaning in the novel.

This deeper aspect grapples with the workings and the mechanism of power at the level of society. While the characters of the novel put much emphasis on awaking their fellow countrymen, the strategy of the government worked the other way around in neutralizing, as well as undercutting these undertakings. The aim of the American government and society becomes taking individuality away from citizens and transforming them into subjects instead, leading to an institutionalized society that forges meek, normal, docile, and ordinary subjects for its institutionalized society.

The institutions all lead to a kind of normalization that limits the minds and worlds of the people who seek to find freedom in their lives. As Michał Krzyżanowski (2020) defines normalization as a concept which classifies people, ideas, and objects:

Though normalization is a term widely known from various contexts (measurement systems, time, weather, physics etc), it has only relatively rarely come to be used in social or political contexts. Or, if such has indeed been the case, the connotations of normalization have usually been very ambivalent and in most cases negative, often bringing associations with attempts to define and classify who/what is “normal”, as well as excluding people, ideas and objects that apparently are not. (p. 434)

The purpose of this study is to represent the real workings of power and power relations in the real context of the United States at the time when Kerouac writes his masterpieces and the researcher hopes to provide a genuine and firsthand representation of the political, social, cultural, and historical context.

2. Discussion

2.1. Police

In one of the most suggestive remarks Foucault has ever made, he struggles to find the authority that is at work in making individuals ordinary by the very people who serve the institutions; here, he comes up with the idea that institutions have come up with people that he calls “judges of normality” and it is through these judges that institutions make surveillance ubiquitous. As Fred Inglis (2010) points to Foucault’s remark:

Once created, the carceral mode of punishment becomes “the greatest support” in spreading this normalizing power to the entire social body, creating what Foucault, excitement mounting, calls “the carceral archipelago.” Here Foucault borrows an image he has not really earned and makes an equation that will not in fact balance out. The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator judge, and ‘social worker’ judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based. (p. 36)

The police, thus, take the position of judges by which they struggle to promote normality in enforcing the draconian rules the government had set with the aim of curbing the freedom and individuality of subjects. The police are not powerful forces to help people enjoy their trips but a limiting force that has the permission to enter into the private lives of individuals, find out what is abnormal about them, and embark on changing them to be aligned with that normative structure that governments have passed and adopted.

With the opening of chapter fifteen, Ray Smith is in San Francisco and goes to visit his friend Cody and his wife Rosie:

I put on my new flannel shirt and new socks and underwear and my jeans and packed the rucksack tight and slung it on and went to San Francisco that night just to get the feel of walking around the city night with it on my back. I walked down Mission Street singing merrily. (Kerouac, 2006, p. 82)

Upon seeing Cody, Ray is terrified to see how thin, skinny, and frightening Rosie has become with her eyes popping out in a scary way. Talking to Cody, Ray is told that she has tried to commit suicide by trying to cut her wrist. Cody argues that Rosie has gone mad fearing that the police are going to arrest her and most people whom she had communicated with in her life:

She says she wrote out a list of all our names and all our sins, she says, and then tried to flush them down the toilet where she works, and the long list of paper stuck in the toilet and they had to send for some sanitation character to clean up the mess and she claims he wore a uniform and was a cop and took it with him to the police station and we’re all going to be arrested. She’s just nuts, that’s all. (Kerouac, 2006, p. 82)

After Cody convinces Ray to look after Rosie while he is out working for the night, Ray and Rosie start talking about the reasons why Rosie is behaving like that. Rosie argues that the police now know everything about Cody and his friends, and they will be definitely arrested sooner or later. She maintains, “You, and Alvah, and Cody, and that Japhy Ryder, all of you, and me. Everybody that hangs around The Place. We’re all going to be arrested tomorrow if not sooner” (p. 82), at the same time that she was looking at the door utterly terrified and probably waiting for the police to come. After Ray asks her why she had tried to kill herself, she points to the revolution of the police that will not allow anybody to live freely, “Because I don’t want to live. I’m telling you there’s going to be a big new revolution of police now”. (p. 82)

Ray struggles to tell her about Buddhism and the way she can get out of the physical world prison that she has created for herself and introduce her to a world where she will be free to seek her own happiness in the realm of spirits. This, however, makes Rosie angrier when she notices Ray does not understand what she is saying. From Rosie’s point of view, there has started a new big police revolution that keeps people under its gaze for days, weeks, or even years before sending all of them to prisons; this happens not only to the people whom she and Cody have communicated with, but, rather, to all the people in their city, state, country, and finally the entire world:

The police are going to swoop down and arrest us all and not only that but we're all going to be questioned for weeks and weeks and maybe even years till they find out all the crimes and sins that have been committed, it's a network, it runs in every direction, finally they'll arrest everybody in North Beach and even everybody in Greenwich Village and then Paris and then finally they'll have everybody in jail, you don't know, it's only the beginning." She kept jumping at sounds in the hall, thinking the cops were coming. (Kerouac, 2006, p. 84)

This scene from the novel points to the ubiquitous surveillance by the institution of police of all the lives of individuals. Furthermore, this foreshadows what will happen to not only to the lives of all individuals in the United States but also to the fate of all humanity in the modern world in which various institutions, specifically the police, are dominating forces in bringing individuals into a truce that guarantees the accumulation power at the hands of the suppressing and repressing regime.

On the border, as well all other sites in America there are innumerable judges of normality whose main job is to find something normal and ordinary and recast it as something abnormal. The guards, the cops, almost all the people who have some positions in the government or occupy positions in the institutions that are set up by states become judges who forge normal and the institutional man in the institutionalized society of America.

2.2. Factories

The institution of factory has been set by the state for two major tasks of producing things, and, more importantly, creating structures. Therefore, people have to go to work and internalize the rules there with the goal of normalizing subjects. Foucault (1995), in *Discipline and Punish*, argues that:

Particular places were defined to correspond not only to the need to supervise, to break dangerous communications, but also to create a useful space. The process appeared [most] clearly ... [in hospitals, prisons, schools, and factories] ... In the factories that appeared at the end of the eighteenth century, the principle of individualizing partitioning became more complicated. It was a question of distributing individuals in a space in which one might isolate them and map them; but also, of articulating this distribution on a production machinery that had its own requirements. (p. 144).

The surveillance that was going on in factories ended up in increasing productions but, more significantly, it was much more influential in making subjects more disciplined and institutionalized.

However, the concept of the institution of factory does not refer to working in a factory solely, but it points to the notion of working in which normality is exercised through working. Japhy had experienced working in a number of different places including woodcutting and working as a fire lookout in the mountains. Despite that fact that both Japhy and Ray see working as staying in sites that help advance their ideas of Buddhism and individuality, the results seem to be questionable and debatable. By the end of the novel, both Japhy and Ray are practicing the same things that they were doing at the beginning of the novel with the addition that they are more determined to follow the path that is set for them by the government; instead of coming up with ideas to keep and nourish their individuality and freedom, they become even more normal in their lives.

2.3. Family

Power and institutions work at two different levels, including the private and the public; while the public spheres such as schools and other academic circumstances, religion, and factories are clearly seen and felt by all individuals, family works at the private sphere, acting as an inherent normalizing force in all modern societies. However, family, along with all other institutions, goes through its pace to promote the exact behaviors that make individuals like each other and homogeneous that will be utterly safe and powerless to think of individuality and freedom as options in the society.

Family, instead of fulfilling the nurturing-freedom function, works as a prisonlike structure that reproduces the same conducts that the government desires. Disseminating conformist ideology to forge institutional men for the institutionalized society, family belies the highly humanistic characteristics that were attributed to it before the invention of modern man and modern society.

Chapter twenty four starts with Ray talking about Sean Monahan. The word that highly stands out in his description is "normal". Ray maintains that "If the Dharma Bums ever get lay brothers in America who live normal lives with wives and children and homes, they will be like Sean Monahan" (Kerouac, 2006, p.122), and sees Sean as the model for all other Dharma Bums who want to be true followers. Sean is a carpenter who has made a wooden house for himself near the country road; he had an old jalopy and had made a nice porch for his would-be children who will be born sometime in future. When he married, he had asked his wife to accompany him to lead the happiest life in America though they were not rich people.

The ideal family that Buddha promotes, to Ray, is a normal, ordinary life that is the one all American people have in mind as perfect and standard. The act of being normal and staying normal is a dominant theme in the novel. When Japhy and Princess come over to Alvah Goldbook's place, they all have tea and spend a great night together which they think must become a ritual. However, after the party and all kinds of conversations about different issues, they all go back to sleep when Ray insists that: "later that night as Alvah slept I sat under the tree in the yard and looked up at the stars or closed my eyes to meditate and tried to quiet myself down back to my normal self" (p. 123). Ray is, in fact, afraid of being abnormal from all aspects including his being excited too much, and learns, from various sources, to resort to his normal self every time he becomes a bit abnormal.

2.4. Panopticon and Surveillance: Judges of Normality Are Everywhere

The concepts of panopticon, surveillance, and the police society are underwritten by Michel Foucault who draws primarily from the nineteenth century utilitarian political philosopher Jeremy Bentham who coined the word panopticon.

Bentham came up with the sinister idea of making a prison in which the cells are designed so as to allow the guards to keep inmates under constant surveillance without their own being seen by them; this circular structure is seen by political philosophers of the modern world as the eye in the sky where individuals are under the dominant surveillance of all the institutions that shed light on all aspects of the lives of individuals. In this modern sinister world, the sinister regimes struggle to find more and more ways to retain the individual under its supervision by which they guarantee the normality of all individuals: "The state regulates all human actions, everything that happens. Society is a type of prison, with the police playing the role of the guard, concerning themselves with those things of every moment." (Koritansky, 2011, p. 212).

When in Chapter nineteen Japhy finally arrives home after visiting Mexico, he sees his mother doing the dishes in the same way that he had imagined before arriving home. The night after, however, is Christmas Eve. In the same way that he had depicted the lives of normal and ordinary people: "The following night was Christmas Eve which I spent with a bottle of wine before the TV enjoying the shows and the midnight mass from Saint Patrick's Cathedral in New York" (Kerouac, 2006, p.102).

Later, he opens his Bible and starts reading Saint Paul. He reads some parts where it puts emphasis on the life of fools and the way it leads to a life of wisdom, and there Ray immediately relates many parts to the way Japhy is and the way he lives. However, in one part, he reads about saints as judges of the world:

I took out the Bible and read a little Saint Paul by the warm stove and the light of the tree, "Let him become a fool, that he may become wise," and I thought of good dear Japhy and wished he was enjoying the Christmas Eve with me. "Already are ye filled," says Saint Paul, "already are ye become rich. The saints shall judge the world." Then in a burst of beautiful poetry more beautiful than all the poetry readings of all the San Francisco Renaissances of Time: "Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats; but God shall bring to naught both it and them". (p. 103)

This idea is utterly in accordance of Foucault's ideas that the judges of normality are present everywhere. In this instance, saints and their disciples become the judges of a world where being religious suffices one to be normal and ordinary.

2.5. *Academic Institutions*

Foucault underwrites some specific institutions such as those of schools, academic institutions, colleges, and universities as sites where disciplinary power is at issue which he sees utterly similar to prison in terms of the techniques and strategies that are used in making individuals conform to the norms which are imposed by the governments. These institutions are highly influential in creating norms and making people adjust themselves to those norms. Peter Kakuk (2017) writes: "Foucault focused on issues through which the phenomena of power were historically manifested in terms of normalization, rationalization, institutionalization, control, subjectivation and embodiment connected to the social life of concrete individuals and communities" (p. 6-7).

Bud has graduated from the University of Chicago as a physicist and then has turned to Buddha who, Ray thinks, is "philosophy's dreadful murderer". To this point in the novel, Ray talks about the high achievements of most of the bums and people in his circle, putting much emphasis on the fact that they all have been university graduates who have devoted most of their lives to learning. For Foucault, the things that are taught at universities contribute not to achieving freedom by individuals that can help them lead freer and happier lives, but to following plans and schedules that make them prepared to the needs and interests of the regime that takes advantage of all institutions to create productive, meek, and normal human beings.

The beginning of chapter three marks the beginning of the mountain climbing trip that has echoed from the early pages of the novel. While it seems that Ray is the first time that he goes mountain climbing, for Japhy, it is something utterly regular and mundane as he knows all the particulars regarding climbing. While waking up the mountain, Japhy and Ray talk about numerous issues including their relationship with women, Japhy's working as a fire lookout in the mountains and his adventures, the real essence of Buddhism, and the like. On their way to the mountain, Ray and Japhy go to a college to pick up Alva Gold book. Ray's account of the way he and Japhy were treated makes him disapprove of colleges, universities, and all other academic institutions. Ray and Japhy, Ray argues, look totally strange and unusual in their old clothes which makes Ray unhappy as he thinks that Japhy is underappreciated and he is much more knowledgeable than all of them together. Ray maintains that Japhy and his appearance seem strange as these college students rarely see real men; for him, the college students all come from families whose big houses are crowded with people whose main obsessions are watching TV and getting brainwashed while he sees Japhy as a hero of the world who calls for freedom, "while the Japhies of the world go prowling in the wilderness to hear the voice crying in the wilderness, to find the ecstasy of stars, to find the dark mysterious secret of the origin of faceless wonderless crapulous civilization" (Kerouac, 2006, p. 28).

That fact is that Ray is, a Foucauldian reading demonstrates, absolutely correct in arguing that people who go to colleges and universities most come from families that are the privileged insiders to the power structure and will end up taking advantage of same mechanisms of power. The people who finish colleges and universities become privileged insiders who use all the hierarchy existing in the power relations provided that they become functionaries in the subject positions of those power relations inventory. While Ray champions the education of his friends and bums, he deplores the education of others on the ground that they are not free individuals. The fact is that, education does lead to nothing but to the further institutionalizing of all individuals involved in it.

3. Conclusion

Seeking freedom, individuality, and avoiding the ordinary which Ray and Japhy are struggling for is something absolutely restricted in the American society; while pre-modern power used to keep individuals under surveillance only when they transgressed the law to punish them, modern power goes far beyond that in keeping subjects under inevitable control from the day one to their complete normality and even after that. Modern power is present everywhere and every minute not to help but to regulate and control all subjects so as not to keep some slots unexamined.

This fact, therefore, reveals the otherwise surprising opening of the novel when Ray defines bums as people who are quiet, normal, and ordinary. The novel opens with Ray Smith's trip from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara on a gondola car where he is joined by another "bum". Ray struggles to apply all his knowledge of Buddhism to him which is sharing his food with him. However, the way that Ray describes the man showing what bums should be is somehow different from his motto in life which is being abnormal and not ordinary; that is, when he portrays the old bum he meets on the gondola car, the words quiet, pitiable, and harmless strike out, while being considered by Ray as the manifestation of the Buddhist way of life.

This opening does not have inconsistencies with the end of the book. By the close of the book, Ray has taken a job as a fire lookout in Desolation Peak which Japhy had suggested. While there, he sees hundreds of kilometers towards every direction and there he is inspired by being the only person enjoying that scene at the specific time. Ray's life in Desolation Peak is summed up in eating, sleeping, and watching; that is to say, by the end of the novel, Ray has become an institutionalized man whose life is distilled into being a robot who is thoroughly told what to do and what not to do. It does not take long, however, until he comes to the understanding that nothing has been left from his individuality and the world and society that had given him meaning are utterly meaningless and empty.

Ray, left in the mountains and purposeless, Japhy, caught up in the institution of religion, and almost all other bums have been imprisoned by various institutions so as to take their individualities away from them and transform them into meek and docile subjects who still need to struggle to find out what has happened to their individualities.

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