

Inked Bodies: Tattooing as Discipline and Deviance on the Basis of Foucault's Inscription of Bodies

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Abstract:

In the recent decades a transformation of tattooing has been witnessed in contemporary Western societies: from a formerly working-class and frowned upon practice to a phenomenon that now reaches far into middle class and can be found on bodies in almost all parts of society - visibly. The development of tattooing in the modern Western societies poses several questions and this thesis is dedicated to finding answers assuming that there must be mechanisms of power and social domination and control underlying it. The conceptual basis will be the notion of the *inscription of bodies* with recourse to French philosopher Michel Foucault. On the basis of his analysis of disciplinary power and its coercive mechanisms this thesis will provide a philosophical account on how it was possible that tattoos could pass from the bodies of sailors, soldiers, convicts and the most outcasts of society onto the bodies of teachers, students, artists and other members of society that are considered respectable by the mainstream. Thus, the aim is to show why tattooing was rapidly embraced by the working class as a popular practice while it was strongly rejected and stigmatized by the middle class, but also how tattooing could ultimately be adopted by the middle class nevertheless. The analysis against the theoretical background of the inscription of bodies will reveal the practice as an illustrative example of how thoroughly we are embedded within in disciplinary structure that constitutes both the way we relate to ourselves and our own bodies and the way we relate to others and their bodies.

Moreover, this thesis takes into account that tattooing has been practised as a means of expressing subversion and resistance in several contexts and therefore aims to comprehend if and how, in this oppressing disciplinary structure, it is possible for individuals to develop agency over their bodies, escape the disciplining mechanism and overwrite the externally imposed inscriptions with a counterinscription. In this context, I will also examine with recourse to the late thought of Foucault how tattooing as a creative activity and practice of freedom can qualify as a technology of the self. The overall aim of the work is to show that tattooing as a practice has served several functions between discipline and deviance in our modern Western societies.

Keywords:

Foucault; tattooing; inscription of bodies; power relations; docility; discipline; deviance; class; resistance; counterinscription; freedom; technology of the self

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1. Introduction

“What’s more how dare you state the depths of your reasons for being inked and then go on to demon others? When inked do we all not bleed?”¹ polemically asks Cecil, a reader of the tattoo magazine *Tattoo Review* in response to a letter to the editor of the magazine whose author had been complaining about the “yuppification” of the tattoo community. Tattoo magazines are numerous and they have a large readership within the community, where they also enjoy great authority since they are produced by fellow tattooists or at least people wearing tattoos and demonstrating profound interest. Yet, and quite interestingly they are not at all united in their content and tendencies. On the contrary, the discourse of these magazines especially in combination with their columns that give voice to their readers perfectly reflects the shift of the tattoo community: a shift that can be observed in the member’s social backgrounds, from the very periphery of society and working-class members towards the middle class. Tattooing has transgressed the social borders from the bodies of sailors, soldiers, convicts and outcasts of society onto the bodies of teachers, students, artists and other members of society that are considered respectable by the mainstream. This development that can be witnessed in the recent decades in contemporary Western societies testifies a transformation from a formerly working-class and frowned upon practice to a phenomenon that now reaches far into the middle class and can be found on bodies in almost all parts of society, visibly. This transformation has not been unnoticed by the community’s members and Cecil’s letter perfectly demonstrates that within that group, presumably unified by the fact of being tattooed, the membership to this community is intensely discussed and challenged. The entire discourse within the community suggests that the middle-class participation has not only diversified the tattoo community but that it has also fostered the concurrence of different notions on what can be considered the more legitimate and authentic exercise of the practice. With the heterogenization of the tattoo community arose a variety of views on what is or can be considered the “right way” of tattooing.

The anthropologist Margo De Mello has made a great effort to analyse this development of tattooing. Her work is based on an analysis of the discourse *within* the tattoo community: an analysis based on a great number of interviews that she had conducted with the members of the community as well as on the content of tattoo magazines. This is very

¹ Cecil in *Tattoo, News and Reviews*, May, 1993 in: DeMello Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 118.

revealing about how the tattoo community itself has changed: it is by far not a homogenous group (anymore), on the contrary, it has developed into different fractions that are divided by artistic, technological and social factors and notions, indicating the individuals' class affiliation.² Moreover, her work shows that the community is not only disunited but that there even can be witnessed the mentioned battle over the control of the culture of tattooing and how the community is supposed to define itself as a community and in relation to society.

This entire development of tattooing is rather puzzling and raises several questions. First of all, we are confronted with the question of how tattooing could spread as a popular and endorsed practice in the working class while it was strongly rejected by the middle class. The history of tattooing in the contemporary Western societies is very much a history of class and the question is why? To shed light on this issue will be another aim of this thesis.

Secondly, and what is considerably startling about this process, is the phenomenon of tattooing as a social practice entering a part of society (the middle class) that before had strongly rejected it and found it inherently detestable. It was not only that tattooing was not common among the members of the middle class. On the contrary, within that social sphere, it was strongly associated with the lower classes, deviant or even anti-social behaviour, unhygienic conditions, and an involved risk of disease. Tattooing carried an incredibly high stigma in the middle class and until today these preconceptions (partly) exist. Nevertheless, we are witnessing that the middle class has embraced the practice, that it is spreading and its popularity still growing. Thus, it is one aim of this thesis to understand how this transition of tattooing onto middle-class bodies was possible.

Thirdly, this work also takes into account that tattooing has been practised among certain social groups as an expression of resistance and as an act of subverting the predominant social norms. Especially in Biker tattooing, and later embedded in the Punk movement, we find this notion of using the practice of tattooing as a form of expression of opposing the dominant social order and taking distance from the mainstream society.³ In Western societies where the tattoo represents the mark of the deviant, this practice is especially interesting, because it means that individuals mark themselves as outcasts of

² Cf. DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, *ibid.*, p. 3.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 68.

society, as a means of expressing their discontent, which makes their (self-provoked) stigma and expulsion voluntary. By deliberately wearing the mark of the deviant, the outcast, while being aware of society's condemnation as a consequence, the tattoo turns into a mark of resistance and reclamation. Therefore, I shall also investigate the question of a possible counterinscription, that is to say, the possibility of individuals developing agency over their bodies and deliberately subverting the dominant culture and its norms.

One cannot say that the phenomenon of tattooing and its development has been neglected by philosophical discourse or by academic interest in general. Actually and very importantly, as we will see in this work, the practice made its way into the Western consciousness through academic discourse and it has developed very much linked with its perception and consideration by academics. Here lies the crucial point: tattooing has been treated after its first appearance as an exotic curiosity mainly as a subject of deviance. Whether in the fields of medicine, psychiatry or criminology, the tattoo is the mark of the deviant. It was strongly linked to criminal and pathological behaviour and investigated in the human sciences as an indicator for mental deficiencies, from depression, sexual perversions to a proneness of drug abuse.⁴ Until today a great amount of academic literature is therefore very much considered with this negative image of tattooing and its association with deviant behaviour. Many attempts of research address the question of what kind of prejudices remain in the population against tattooing and tattoo wearers, or what social groups are more prone towards holding prejudices,⁵ but not where these preconceptions actually come from. Also within the field of philosophy once can find attempts to examine this phenomenon and to find answers on how the practice of tattooing could turn into the semiotic representation of deviance, pathologies and perversions but later be accepted and even adopted. There is the approach of considering deviance relative to social and cultural contexts, as does, for example, Mary Kosut in her analysis *Mad Artists and Tattooed Perverts: Deviant Discourse and the Social Construction of Cultural Categories*. There is also the approach of dividing deviance in a negative and positive form and the classification of behaviour within these categories often derives from the status of the actor, as we find it in Katherine Irving's *Saints*

⁴ Cf. Kosut, Mary, "Mad Artists and Tattooed Perverts: Deviant Discourse and the Social Construction of Cultural Categories", *Deviant Behavior*, vol. 27/ nr. 1 (2006), pp. 80-82.

⁵ On this topic see Adams (2009), Martin and Dula (2010), Larsen, Patterson, and Markham (2014).

and Sinners: Elite Tattoo Collectors and Tattooists as Negative and Positive Deviants. The titles of these works alone reveal how strongly the notion of deviance is linked with the practice of tattooing. Mad artists, tattooed perverts, saints and sinners. Those are all categories that derive from different cultural sections, but each one of them implies that tattooing represents something inherently deviant from an assumed order, whether it is of a biological, cultural, or even religious nature. It is, of course, legitimate to investigate this phenomenon through the approach of examining deviance in general as relative and variable, but despite all the effort, this approach is rendered inconclusive when it comes to explaining the transition of tattooing into a part of society that just (a few decades ago) had declared it despicable. And moreover, what remains at question is, why was it considered deviant in the first place?

De Mello illustrates very well the transformation of tattooing and its outcome which is the fragmentation of the tattoo community wherein questions about membership and notions about a “right” way of tattooing are discussed. She gives explanations for this development by referring to Foucault and the notions of “social bodies” and “cultured bodies”, that is to say, bodies inscribed by culture. She reasons that the practice of tattooing had to undergo a transformation to comply with middle-class norms so that it could be adopted by it. Her work is very conclusive about what exactly had to change in tattooing in order to cross the social border into the middle class. What remains unanswered is what exactly are those middle-class norms and notions tattooing had to comply to and where are they coming from.

This work is dedicated to developing a comprehension of tattooing that considers the practice against a philosophical background and supposes that the practice is or must be related to notions about the human body and subjectivity, which in turn must be subjected to mechanisms of power that are operating in our modern Western societies. The designated and defining aim is to understand the described transition of tattooing by linking it directly to those underlying mechanisms.

The theoretical framework my thesis will be based on is the notion of the *inscription of bodies* which is quite common in poststructuralist theory. This inscription does not mean a real, material inscription but how social orders and realities shape our relation towards our bodies, to those of the others and to the world, by which we are surrounded. Thus, what is inscribed is not something literal or obviously symbolic and decipherable. What is inscribed

is our social realities.⁶ Hence, under this notion bodies also represent a site of the inscription of political power, class or in general, the dominant social order. Of main relevance for the conceptualization in this thesis will be the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. By examining his central works, mainly *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction*, as well as key texts from the 80's, such as *Self-Writing*, *Technologies of the Self*, *On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress*, *The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom*, we shall see how surrounding the human body several mechanisms of power are constantly at work and shaping the individuals' relations to their bodies and constituting their subjectivity. I am founding this thesis on works from two different periods of Foucault. The works from the middle period were essential in order to understand the operation of processes in our contemporary societies, for instance, disciplinary power, norms, sciences, etc., whereas the later texts helped me to conceptualize tattoos as a possible means of resistance, counterpower and counterinscription of bodies.

One important feature of those mechanisms is that they vary within cultural contexts as well as with historical developments, and thus vary the notions of the human body and subjectivity. As the anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes concludes in a study of poor sugarcane workers in Brazil: "From the phenomenological perspective, all the mundane activities of working, eating, grooming, resting and sleeping, having sex, and getting sick and getting well are forms of body praxis and expressive of dynamic social, cultural, and political relations."⁷

This work includes tattooing among all these practices, presupposing that just like them it cannot escape the influence of its social, cultural and political environment. I moreover assume that tattooing represents a social practice in which the metaphorical inscription of bodies by power and class becomes very literal and reflects notions about the body that correspond to the dominant social order.

Thus, the overall aim of this work is to reveal tattooing as a practice that can serve several functions between discipline and deviance.

⁶ Cf. Schildkrout, Enid, "Inscribing the Body", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 33 (2004), p. 319.

⁷ Scheper-Hughes, Nancy in: DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 140.

My approach will be the following:

I will first give important insights into the cultural history of tattooing. Due to the aim of this work I will mainly and more extensively focus on its development in the West since the rediscovery of the practice that generally is dated back to Captain James Cook's discovery of Tahiti and the island's tattooed Natives until today. In that way, I shall demonstrate that the history of tattooing alone reveals quite illustratively how the perception of tattooing varies with the social and political environment, dominant social order, and discourse, that is surrounding it. The practice of human beings permanently marking themselves can be found in almost any culture and society, including Europe. This quasi-ubiquity of tattooing contributes to the notion of tattooing as an inherently human practice. Today this notion is not only subject to several academic disciplines, but moreover became central to the contemporary middle-class understanding of tattooing. The practice disappeared from Europe with the emergence of Christianity and was only rediscovered with the oversea explorations as a "primitive" practice performed by the Natives. It was the sailors who would come back to the "old world" with tattoos from their travels and in this way transported tattooing back into the awareness of the West, where it turned into the mark of the exotic, and/or the primitive.⁸ The newly rediscovered practice was soon embraced by soldiers going off to World War I and in the following years, tattooing became a popular custom in the working class.⁹ It is this time which until today shapes the image of tattooing as something that would happen in the darkest corners and filthiest bars, where sailors, drunks and all the other outcasts of society would mark themselves and their social stigma with non-sterile needles and self-made ink. It is also this image which until today preserves (to a certain extent) the negative perception of tattooing even though nowadays tattoos can be found all over and moreover turned into a trend, that is represented on well represented Instagram profiles and performed in highly sterile and stylish studios. It was also this time which transformed the tattoo from the mark of the exotic to the mark of the deviant. We will find that this ostensible contradiction between the social stigma and the popularity that reaches far over social borders is actually explicable if we take a closer look into the development of tattooing in the West and under what circumstances and preconditions tattooing made its way into middle class,

⁸ Cf. DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 44-49.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 50-52.

which is well documented in Margo DeMello's *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. The last part of chapter 2 will, therefore, examine DeMello's study of this transgression. It will be revealed that it is fundamentally based on a rewriting of the history of tattooing which completely neglects its working-class roots in order to detach it from its stigmatized image.¹⁰ Altogether chapter 2 will demonstrate that the history of tattooing already represents an illustration of how the perception of tattooing varies with the social and political environment, dominant social order, and discourse, that is surrounding it.

Chapter 3 will take a more elaborate look into this matter and its theoretical background to comprehend how tattooing can be understood as a site of the inscription of power, class, but also resistance. This chapter will be considerably more extensive than the previous one. The designated aim of this thesis is to provide a philosophical interpretation of the historical development of tattooing described in chapter 2. According to this superordinate aim, chapter 2 rather serves as a means than an end, whereas chapter 3 will be thoroughly concerned with the philosophical analysis this thesis is dedicated to.

I will first give a detailed explanation of the central concept in chapter 3.1 *The Inscription of Bodies* from which I will derive the rest of my analysis. The concept centres around the notion of the body as a surface upon which social reality is inscribed. This social reality represents a complex network of the social, political, economic and cultural circumstances, altogether the historical condition in which the subject can find itself. The idea that this social reality is inscribed on the body means that it determines the way the subject constitutes and understands itself, the way it relates to itself and others, the way it perceives and inhabits its own body. What is central to Foucault's conceptualization of this process is his understanding of power. He assumes that relations of power should be considered the driving force behind such historical developments. He complexifies the widespread notion of power as a (physical) predominance possessed by a monarch, a dominant class or government. Instead, he assumes power beyond the juridico-political apparatus, as a technique of governing people's conduct. As such it penetrates the entire social body and produces a row of mechanisms, techniques and instruments that allow to manipulate the individual's behaviour in the desired way. The implication of this notion is the assumption that there is a determining link between power and subjectivity, which means that

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 182.

power is significant in the way a subject constitutes itself as such and ultimately how it behaves. It is power what can be considered to determine what is inscribed on a body.

In the first subchapter *The Disciplining of Bodies* I will thoroughly examine how exactly power is applied on an individual in our modern Western societies. In his work *Discipline and Punish* Foucault demonstrates how since the Classical Age and with the emergence of the modern state a disciplinary form of power has developed that under the use of certain instruments and mechanisms very subtly but also very efficiently coerces to a desired behaviour, it produces docility. I will elaborate on the main features of this disciplinary power and the techniques and mechanisms it applies. Of main interest for this thesis will be the norm and the human sciences as enormously efficient instruments of coercion as they are not only central strategies of disciplinary power, but I also believe them to be the two main instruments that rendered tattooing a deviant behaviour and were capable to keep large parts of society from engaging with the practice without any legal intervention.

The second subchapter *The Politics of the Body* will be concerned with the question of how tattooing could be embraced by one class, the working class, while it was strongly rejected and stigmatized within another, the middle class. We have to assume that depending on their class affiliation people must relate differently towards their bodies. In his work *The History of Sexuality I*, Foucault argues that since the Enlightenment the human body has become an object of knowledge: a knowledge that serves as a technology of power that is directed to the preservation of life. Foucault speaks of an *era of a bio-power*¹¹ that has the designated objective of ensuring the survival of the species, or more accurately the survival of a social class (the bourgeoisie). This will help us understand the type of notions surrounding the body, and hence, tattooing in the middle class, but also why and how working-class bodies escaped those notions, at least for a certain amount of time.

Altogether chapter 3.1 *The Inscription of Bodies* will be concerned with two main questions, namely *how* the inscription of bodies works, thus which mechanisms are applied and *why* they are applied, that is, what is their superordinate aim. This will help us to understand how tattooing could become a popular and endorsed practice in the working class, while it was profoundly stigmatized in the middle class.

¹¹ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987, p. 140.

As I have indicated above, tattooing has also been practised as a means of resistance among several groups. Within the act of deliberately marking oneself with a sign that has been deeply invested with the semiological meaning of deviance and provoked marginalization and exclusion lies a considerable subversive potential. Chapter 3.2 *Resistant Bodies: Tattooing as the Site of Subversion* will exhaustively discuss the possibility of a counterinscription against the theoretical framework of the relations of power as examined in chapter 3.1.

The first subchapter *Resistance as Reaction* will show how the phenomenon of tattooing as a mark of resistance does not simply involve individuals undermining certain aesthetic standards and norms, but that it also should be understood within the continuous and complex interplay between power and resistance. In the late period of his thought, Foucault conceptualizes resistance as a necessary implication of power and vice versa. He presupposes that power can only be assumed where they are free subjects, and those free subjects must have the possibility to resist.¹² Against this theoretical background, we can see how the development of tattooing into a means and mark of resistance can be understood as an almost necessary consequence of the constant struggle between power and resistance.

In the subchapter *Developing Agency*, I will elaborate on how tattooing, when confronting domination, can function as an instrument to regain control and reclaim one's body. By examining several historical examples it will be shown how the deliberate wearing of a sign that has been declared deviant reinterprets that sign and can be understood as writing over the externally imposed inscription. Thus, we will see how tattooing being exercised with exactly this purpose can function as a means of undermining domination and overcoming alienation.

The next subchapter *The Reabsorption of Resistance* will finally shed light on the remaining question of how it was possible that after tattooing had been so firmly rejected by the middle class it could finally be adopted by it nevertheless. I will argue that this phenomenon can be traced back to a two-fold process. The first aspect will concern the reflection of this development against the theoretical background of the relations of power with reference to the concept of carnivalization as Lauren Langman has described it with recourse to Mikhail Bakhtin. He suggests that transgressive expressions such as extreme body

¹² Cf. Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth: The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 292.

modifications, for instance, tattooing, sooner or later will be incorporated in the dominant culture by appropriating it, by consuming it as a fashion product and thus, disassociating it from its countercultural context of resistance. Through this process, its subversive potential will be neutralized. Thus, we will see how the phenomenon of carnivalization as a manifestation of relations of power and an underlying dominant culture is a necessary element to explain the middle-class appropriation of tattooing.

The second aspect that I believe important in order to understand this phenomenon is the transformation that tattooing had to undergo to be embraced by the middle class. I will demonstrate how those modifications in the exercise of the practice and its presupposed meaning reproduced the cultural domination of the middle class and the related norms and notions within the middle class, that again rendered the working-class form of tattooing deviant.

While this might suggest that this represents the current picture of tattooing, namely a formerly working-class practice that used to be frowned upon, but now has been adopted by the middle class and thus, has rather become a fashion product than a sign of resistance, the subchapter *The New Transgression* will show that on the contrary, this new middle-class domination in the tattoo community has not eliminated, but rather fostered new forms of transgressions. As for where there is power, there is resistance and it is exercised upon free individuals, the relations of power are always in flux. The consequence is a constant struggle that we can observe in the tattoo community as well. I will show, that first of all, this phenomenon manifests itself in the ongoing battle between the fragmentations of the tattoo community that has not ceased with the middle-class domination and claim of control.

Moreover, I will demonstrate how we can observe a quest for new transgressive expressions that has resulted in the emergence of new styles and imagery that seeks to undermine the established mainstream aesthetics. There will be two main trends that I want to examine more thoroughly. First of all, the *ignorant tattoos*, a style that is deliberately less technically refined using very simple imagery, and secondly the recently growing interest in homemade tattoos, which are tattoos made in private homes without any professional expertise or standards. Both trends I believe to be a reaction on the middle-class domination in the tattoo community and the corresponding mainstream aesthetics and an attempt to restore the moment of transgression within tattooing.

Finally, in the subchapter *Tattooing as a Technology of the Self*, I will argue that moreover, the absorption of the resistant element of tattooing within the dominant culture does not disqualify the moment in which a subject develops agency over its body for the subject itself. With recourse to Foucault's conceptualization of what he calls *technologies of the self*, exercises, operations, procedures an individual can apply in order to constitute themselves as a subject in a certain way, to transform themselves as more pure, wise, beautiful, etc.,¹³ I will argue that tattooing can function as a self-forming activity, and as such as a technology of the self.

Altogether, this thesis will show how the development of tattooing in contemporary Western societies can be explained with recourse to underlying relations of power within these societies, and thus how the practice is interpreted throughout its history between the poles of discipline and deviance.

2. The Cultural History of Tattooing

2.1 Tattooing as a Human Constant

The history of tattooing can be understood very much as a history of man itself. The practice of human beings permanently marking themselves using various kinds of techniques goes way back to our origins. We can find tattooing throughout history in almost every culture, that has existed around the globe. While tattooing, therefore, is quasi ubiquitous, its social function varies among different cultures and societies. The practice can be found to be serving an almost unimaginably great range of purposes.

I shall not narrate the entire history of tattooing, for it is way too extensive and not of main relevance in this work. But I want to illustrate how tattooing cannot be solely understood as an artistic practice, that centres around human beings marking themselves on their skin. It will be shown how according to its social and cultural context tattooing is exercised in order to perform certain social functions, and therefore should also be taken into account as a social practice.

One function that we can find commonly in the tattooing of tribes around the globe and throughout history is the expression of group affiliation. It is widely known to be

¹³ Cf. Foucault, Michel. *The Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1988, p. 18.

practised among what the Western world considers exotic and primitive tribes as the Maori in New Zealand or the tribes of Tahiti, that gave the tattoo its name (from the Tahitian word “ta-tu” or “tatau” for “to strike”).¹⁴ In a tribal context tattooing often appears within rites marking certain passages of a lifetime like puberty, marriage or reaching a certain age and wisdom.

The Maori facial tattoo, called “Moko” moreover, does not only represent an individual’s belonging to a group. The designs even give clues about the family of the wearer and includes a unique detail, that identifies the wearer and only the wearer, so that the moko becomes not only a mark of affiliation but also of very individual identity.¹⁵

What enjoys less awareness in the public knowledge and discourse around tattooing than its occurrence among “exotic” tribes, is the fact, that even in the occident the practice has been widely spread since immemorial times. For instance, Roman Historian Tacitus bears witness about the Germanic tribes wearing “Y”s or “I”s on their foreheads depending on their affiliation.¹⁶

Other functions that tattooing served were to mark someone as property as it was common in ancient Greece, where slaves were marked with forehead tattoos or as a punishment practised among the Babylonians. Only with Emperor Constantine and the advent of Christianity in the occident tattooing started to be banned and advanced to disappear. And yet, even after the ban and whilst considered a pagan practice we find occasional practising of tattooing in the West for instance among the Crusaders, who tattooed Christian symbols to be guaranteed a Christian funeral or as a mere expression of religious feelings.¹⁷ Even in the christianized Europe tattooing was linked to the practice of magic and medicine, in the context of the belief that with the alteration of one’s own body one could also alter one’s destiny and conjure occult powers.¹⁸

By examining the history of tattooing one comes to the conclusion that the practice is almost omnipresent in the history of mankind. Therefore it is often considered to represent a genuinely human characteristic. As a tattooist interviewed by Margo DeMello points out:

¹⁴ Cf. DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 140.

¹⁵ Cf. Bell, Shannon, “Tattooed: A Participant Observer’s Exploration of Meaning”, *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 22/ nr. 2 (1999), p. 53.

¹⁶ Cf. Pierrat, Jérôme, *The Little Book of Knowledge: Tattoos*. San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2017, p.5.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁸ Cf. Schildkrout, Enid, “Inscribing the Body”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 33 (2004), p. 325.

“[...] tattooing is one of the rare things out there that’s characteristically human in a direct anthropological way by definition, because it existed in all cultures without cultural exchange.”¹⁹ At the same time, when studying the occurrences of the practice throughout history and whilst considering its various surrounding social contexts, as well as the purpose of tattooing, demonstrates how while tattooing represents some sort of human constant, there is an enormously broad range of social functions that tattooing can comply.

Moreover, if we follow the history of tattooing in one specific cultural context, we can discover that in correspondence with social changes the practice and its status within society changes as well. Japan serves as a very illustrative example: For a long time, Japanese tattooing is and has been among the artistically most advanced exercisings of the practice. It is taught from highly trained masters, the pieces are extremely large, usually covering the entire body and the designs are based on Japanese mythology and do not only depict a centrepiece, but also highly detailed backgrounds. While it originally was a privilege for elites and especially warriors to be decorated with such well designed and large pieces, it was later adopted among the Yakuza and for a long time it was exclusively them, criminals, wearing tattoos in Japan. In 1811 the Shogun’s government formulated a law to restrain the practice and in 1872 tattooing was banned entirely.²⁰ Until today tattoos carry such a high social stigma in Japanese society that tattooed people are segregated from the rest of society so much that they are driven out into separate bathhouses, brothels and bars.²¹ This example of the practice of tattooing studied within one cultural background demonstrates how it also represents a reflection of social and political realities that can change within the frame of a single society.

So altogether, considering all these appearances of tattooing as a practice, but also its specific functions and social contexts, we can find that tattooing can surely be understood as a practice has been performed throughout the history of mankind ut in the most various ways, functions and purposes. This work is dedicated to exploring the practice and its social function in our contemporary Western societies due to its socio-political history that led the current form of the practice and how it is perceived.

¹⁹ Bob in: DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. IX.

²⁰ Pierrat, Jérôme. *The Little Book of Knowledge: Tattoos*. San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2017, p. 53.

²¹ Cf. Bell, Shannon, “Tattooed: A Participant Observer’s Exploration of Meaning”, *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 22/ nr. 2 (1999), p. 53.

2.2 Development in the West

The history of contemporary tattooing in the West starts with the rediscovery of the practice during the explorations of the “New World”. Ever since the practice has been embraced by different parts of society, it has crossed borders of nations and classes and with that has undergone certain transformations. While it was strongly linked to the Exotic, it was later firmly associated with the lower classes and even the most outcasts of society. And yet, the tattoo made its way deep into the middle class and highly equipped studios are flooding cities and towns all over our contemporary societies. The development of tattooing as a practice and its perception and acceptance in society illustrates well how power, institutions and the equivalent discourse shape, define and redefine how the practice, as well as its performers, are categorized. In this chapter, I will give a chronological overview of the development in the West and try to highlight certain turning points that mark the transformation of tattooing which will be analyzed philosophically in chapter 3.

2.2.1 Disappearance and Rediscovery: The Mark of the Exotic

After tattooing had disappeared (almost completely) from the occident with the advent of Christianity and the ban through Roman Emperor Constantine,²² and public awareness about the practice had basically been erased, tattooing had to be rediscovered. As soon as the European efforts of discovery began we can find references of encounters with permanently marked people. Already in the 13th century, Marco Polo told about tattooed inhabitants of Yunnan and the Kingdom of Burma (today Myanmar). In the 16th century, Jacques Cartier and John White mention having met tattooed men on an expedition to Virginia.²³ Those sporadic encounters have well been documented, but did not have any considerable impact on the European societies and had barely been noted by them.

The first noted discovery of tattooing that created a stir, occurred with the explorations of the Pacific and its islands. In 1769 Captain James Cook was the first European to discover Tahiti, which is where he and his crew encountered the island’s tattooed Natives.²⁴

²² Cf. Pierrat, Jérôme, *The Little Book of Knowledge: Tattoos*. San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2017, p. 6.

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 19.

Why did those encounters only now have a notable impact? What had been different from the early discoveries of the practice overseas?

It was the time of the Enlightenment and in that context, crews had been accompanied by scholars and academics that set out together with the navigators in order to gain scientific insights from around the globe.²⁵ It was their curiosity and their detailed notes about the practice, the designs and the techniques that paved the way of tattooing into (scientific) European discourse. This fact of tattooing only entering the European consciousness against the background of scientific explorations and contemplation is not of little importance; it shall remain well remembered and will be discussed further on in chapter 3.

Moreover, the scholars' interest did not halt after that and together with some crewman they even let the natives mark their own skins. Cook's ship doctor Sydney Parkinson notes in his journal: "Mr. Sainsby, my-self and some others of our company, underwent the operation, and had our arms marked: the stain left in the skin, which cannot be effaced without destroying it, is of a lively bluish purple, similar to that made upon the skin by gun powder."²⁶ Thus, the first sight of marked bodies back in the Western societies was actually on Western bodies as souvenirs from the great voyages on the bodies of the explorers and sailors.

Being an object of both travels and exploration as well as of scientific interest the tattoo soon turned into the mark of the Exotic and adventure. Like other artefacts from the "New World" the tattoo enjoyed the Europeans' curiosity and fascination, and as we should be aware of, the curiosity of those who would have access to these discoveries and the (scientific) discourse surrounding it, namely members of the bourgeoisie. As a symbol of exoticism, the tattoo even ended up on royal bodies for instance on the Grand Dukes Konstantin, Nikolai and Alexander, Prince George of Greece, King Oscar of Sweden and the Prince of Wales.²⁷

At the same time, the crewman of voyages following Cook's expedition that had first caused Europeans to get tattooed embraced the idea of collecting souvenirs of this type and soon the practice began to spread among sailors on all kinds of expeditions around the world. The colonization of the Polynesian Islands and the, therefore, ongoing contact and exchange

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁶ Parkinson, Sydney, in: Pierrat, Jérôme, *The Little Book of Knowledge: Tattoos*. San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2017, p. 20.

²⁷ Cf. Pierrat, Jérôme, *The Little Book of Knowledge: Tattoos*. San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2017, p. 32.

between Natives and Western travellers led to a cross-fertilization of the Polynesian technique and Western designs. The original imagery of the Tahitian tattooing had been made up mainly by lines, stars and other geometric forms in addition to depictions of animals, plants and humans. Very likely their functions were of genealogical and protective nature. With the Europeans in the picture, the imagery started to broaden and include cannons and rifles, as well as words and dates.²⁸

While it remained extremely popular among sailors and explorers to get tattooed in order to commemorate either the loved ones at home or the great voyages themselves, the colonization and exploitation of the Pacific and its people did not only cause the sailors bringing back home the tattoos on their bodies. The Europeans also started to capture tattooed natives to showcase them to a Western audience. They were displayed in pubs, fairs and museums and rapidly turned into a huge attraction. This exhibition of tattooed natives created an image of the practice that was strongly associated not only with the Exotic anymore but also with the Primitive. It cemented the idea of the tattoo as a mark of the primitive and savage “other” as opposed to the own European identity as civilized.²⁹ Already in early comparative studies, we can find this notion of contrasting the intact “natural” bodies in the image of God of the civilized Europeans opposed by the uncivilized, savage bodies of the Natives as in John Bowler’s *Anthropometamorphosis*.³⁰

Yet and as we will see later notably, sailors kept collecting tattoos from their travels and it was with them that tattooing transgressed from an exclusively exotic practice into the working class of Western societies.³¹

2.2.2 Tattooing as the Mark of the Deviant

Looking into this very chapter of the history of tattooing in the West is revealing in several aspects. First of all, it is this chapter which shaped and cemented the negative perception of tattooing for a long time and that categorized the practice itself just as much as people who are wearing tattoos as aberrant and representing the very periphery of society. The fact that tattooing as a working-class practice within the mainstream was perceived as a

²⁸ Cf. De Mello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 45-46.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.* p. 47.

³⁰ Cf. Schildkrout, Enid, *Inscribing the Body, Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 33 (2004), p. 324.

³¹ Cf. De Mello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 49.

practice that was considered despicable and intolerable gives clues about its predominant notions about deviancy as well as about the body, what will be discussed in detail in chapter 3. Secondly, we will also see how those categorizations are corresponding with the prevailing institutional discourses, structural and social changes and how they are affecting each other.

As analysed above, after tattoos reconquered the Western world either on the bodies of sailors and travellers or on those of captured Natives from the colonies, tattoos were perceived as either the mark of the adventure or the exotic and primitive. It is important though to notice that in both cases the tattoo represents the “other”, something that does not belong to the core of the society. While the Natives were considered not only different, but as “primitive” (a notion that was constructed as opposed to the own identity as civilized), even the sailors and adventurers cannot be understood as representatives of mainstream society, nor of its lifestyle and values. Consequently, we have to note that even as the mark of the adventure and the exotic, the tattoo clearly was the mark of the “other”. The very Western history of the practice had been long forgotten and with the belief that it originated in the “uncivilized” non-Western cultures, the deviant status of tattooing in the West started to manifest itself. This “otherness” was reinforced by the development of tattooing when it transgressed from the primitive bodies to working-class bodies.

The first Westerners to embrace the practice of tattooing were, as mentioned, the sailors, clearly representing a lower-class milieu, but also those who laid the foundation stones for Western tattooing in terms of style and imagery. The designs from that time and that today are considered “traditional” were commonly emphasizing patriotism and the flashes mainly consisted of highly standardized drawings of military insignia, ships, knives, skulls, but also images of women in a pin-up style.³² With the invention of the first electric tattoo machine in 1891, tattooing in the West ultimately dissociates from the manner it was practised in the “primitive” societies.

Tattooing with a machine is much faster, easier to execute, less painful and cheaper. Those conditions gave access to the lower classes and tattoos began soon to spread on the bodies of working-class men. Notable within that context is that the lower classes embracing the practice led the rich to abandon the practice in turn.³³

³² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 52.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 50.

Moreover, it should also be noted that tattooing not only developed into a working-class practice considering those who would get tattoos. Also, the tattooers were in almost every case men from the working class and besides self-trained. While the practice in the “primitive” cultures was taught from master to apprentice, tattooists in the West usually had to teach themselves and were if anything instructed by correspondence courses.³⁴

But after all, it is this era that is considered the golden age of tattooing, namely and especially the time between the two world wars. Before going off to war it became a trend among soldiers and recruits to get a tattoo. They mainly drew on the imagery and designs that had been made popular by the sailors holding usually very literal meanings: serving to commemorate the loved ones back home and/or to evoke patriotism and bravery.³⁵ This link with patriotism and the service in the military generated quite a high level of acceptance. Because it was not exclusively, but predominantly sailors and soldiers wearing tattoos, it was a common assumption that a tattooed man must have been a serving man.³⁶

The sentiments towards tattooing started to change after World War II. The non-sterile and unhygienic conditions under which tattooing had been practised in the many shops in dodgy neighbourhoods and at society’s periphery had caused major outbreaks of hepatitis, which led to several bans at one hand, and more strict regulations, that many shops could not meet and which therefore had to close. Even within the Navy, the very incubator of tattooing in the Western world, the authorities started to warn their recruits about tattoos. In addition to its connotation with the lower classes and margins of society tattooing now was also seen in connection with real and severe health hazards. Altogether this led to a grave and vehement rejection of the practice in the middle class and consequently also to low acceptance of people wearing tattoos. The negative sentiments towards tattooing grew so strong, that many ex-servicemen suffering severe discrimination and prejudices actually started to regret their tattoos.³⁷

Hence, tattooing was even more driven out to the very periphery of society and was predominantly exercised by the most outcast individuals. The mainstream repudiation of the practice led to a very interesting phenomenon in terms of the meaning of tattooing: it caused a major shift in the social function of the practice. As representing something highly despised

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 63.

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

by the mainstream, tattooing became an identifying and confrontational practice among those excluded from society. Instead of expressing patriotism the tattoo was functioning as a way to challenge middle-class values and to express one's rejection of those values. Under this new notion tattoos spread among the members of marginal groups representing a clear opposition towards the mainstream and its lifestyle. Consequently, this new social function of tattooing within the community of tattooed people, namely the outsiders, cemented the negative perception and rejection of the practice in the middle class. In that manner, the tattoo turned ultimately into the mark of deviance.³⁸

Among all those outcasts of society, there is one group that had been associated the most with tattoos: the Bikers. Biker tattooing had firmly embraced the idea of tattooing as a means of expression of discontent and abandonment of life in the mainstream shaped by middle-class values and as an identifying moment of choosing to mark oneself as an outcast of this society and a member of another group. That notion also caused a significant change in the style and designs of tattooing, that clearly rejected the traditional style and its tendency to express patriotic sentiments. Instead, the style developed into almost exclusively black designs made up of fine lines, which generated a very visual difference to the traditional style. Of course, the imagery dissociated from the old style as well and rejected all the influences of military insignia and patriotism. Instead, it was very often explicitly anti-social expressing the practice's new function of distancing oneself from mainstream society.³⁹

Another style of tattooing that serves a similar social function is the Chicano style. While visually it resembles the biker tattooing it originates in a different social background: the pachuco gang culture. The tattoos were functioning as well as a means of identification (of gang members) and drawing a clear line between an in- and out-group. While in the in-group the tattoos serve to express a sense of belonging and solidarity, in the out-group (the middle class) as being highly related to the gang culture the practice of tattooing was connected one more time with crime, violence and a social sphere far from common middle-class values.⁴⁰

The one form of tattooing though that presumably can be considered the one that is perceived in the most negative light and therefore carries the greatest stigma is prison

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 67.

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 68.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 68.

tattooing. In terms of style, it adopted from biker as well as from Chicano tattooing. Yet, prison specific motifs can be found as well.⁴¹ By voluntarily marking themselves, inmates accept to permanently carry the stigma of crime and prison even after their release (if they actually have the perspective to be released). The phenomenon of prison tattooing is one of the most complex, but also appalling aspects of the practice in general, that certainly will not be fully explained by this work. Its complexity requires a whole analysis for itself. In any case, in terms of the middle-class perception of tattooing, it represents an important element since prison tattooing created the ultimate association of the practice with crime and deviance.

We find this development very well reflected in the scientific discourse of this time mainly in the fields of psychiatry and criminology. Numerous studies centre around the notion that tattoos represent a direct link to pathologies and deviances. The underlying assumption is that the body and in the context of tattooing especially the skin can be considered reliable indicators for certain aspects of personality and behaviour.⁴² Already in 1908 criminologist, Adolf Loos wrote: “Those who are tattooed but are not imprisoned are latent criminals. ... If a tattooed person dies at liberty, it is only that he died a few years before he committed a murder.”⁴³ The same notion appears in Cesare Lombroso’s Criminal Man-theory, that considers biology as a cause for crime and deviance and that therefore believes deficiencies could be detected by studying an individual’s physique, including artificial marks on the skin.⁴⁴ In the article “The Tattooed Man”, from 1936, psychiatrists find tattooed people to be more impulsive, immature, psychopathic and more likely to commit a crime than their other patients. Even in more recent studies, even though way less condemning of the practice, one can find the very same notion of tattoos being an indicator for personality disorders when researching correlations between wearing tattoos and demonstrating unhealthy or deviant behaviour.⁴⁵ This academic discourse surrounding the

⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴² Cf. Kosut, Mary, “Mad Artists and Tattooed Perverts: Deviant Discourse and the Social Construction of Cultural Categories”, *Deviant Behavior*, vol. 27/ nr. 1 (2006), p. 81.

⁴³ Loos, Adolf, in: Sullivan, Nikki, The Somatechnics of Bodily Inscription: Tattooing, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 10 (2009), p. 130.

⁴⁴ Camacho, Jocelyn, “The Tattoo: A Mark of Subversion, Deviance, or Mainstream Self-Expression?” (2014). *Graduate Theses and Graduate Dissertations*. <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/4994>.

⁴⁵ Cf. Sullivan, Nikki, The Somatechnics of Bodily Inscription: Tattooing, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 10 (2009), pp. 131-132.

practice of tattooing is not of low importance and represents a crucial point to discuss further in chapter 3.

We have seen now how tattooing transformed from the mark of the exotic and adventure into the mark of a working-class practice. Besides, it has been shown how the growing rejection of the mainstream society provoked the deliberate embracing of tattooing as the mark of the (voluntary) outsider. This, in turn, reinforced the connotation of the practice with social and economic marginalization as well as with crime and violence. The sentiments towards tattooing within middle class consequently were shaped by the feeling of being openly offended in one's values and beliefs. Even those tattoos that were not incorporating any kind of confrontational or anti-social meaning, and that were merely decorative, would be immediately associated with deviant behaviour.

2.2.3 The Reinvention of Tattooing in the Middle Class

Today we are looking at quite a different picture. Tattooing where it is visible has developed into a trend that has generated a broad range of different styles and aesthetic aspects. The one who is getting a tattoo today will most likely not acquire it in a bar surrounded by drunks, turbulences and exposed to a high risk of infection picking a design from a standardized flash. Instead, people will go through a (more or less) long period of contemplating, elaborating and finally choosing a design reflecting their own ideas in collaboration with a tattooist, commonly referred to as an artist.

Most recently this process would be highly supported by Instagram, which (among other things) has become a platform where tattooists can show their portfolio, offer appointments and designs and easily acquire customers. Especially boosted by the opportunities given by social media tattooing has become almost omnipresent.

By studying this omnipresence we will find that this visibility of tattooing is unified by a series of characteristics. Where the practice of tattooing does not meet those required characteristics, it will be at least less visible if not invisible. What is underlying is the notion of a "right" or "legitimate" execution of the practice, or in other words, an execution of the practice that is considered tolerable.

What allowed that a formerly despised and frowned upon practice that used to be pushed back to the very periphery of society could slowly conquer middle-class bodies, and finally even galleries and art museums?⁴⁶

In the literature, this phenomenon is often referred to as the Tattoo Renaissance.⁴⁷ I prefer not to use that term because it suggests that tattooing had disappeared and was rediscovered or even more literally was reborn. But in fact, tattooing had been constantly practised first of all around the globe within various social and cultural contexts and secondly, even in the West it was rediscovered way before and practised by the working class. The reasons for using the term *Renaissance* seem to refer to the aspect of tattooing (ostensibly suddenly) attracting another type of audience and the practice transgressing the social borders towards the middle class. But as pointed out already, tattooing had been practised before that, even though less visibly and far less tolerated. As the following chapter will show, this phenomenon rather characterizes a process of appropriation and the creation of social distance than a process of mere rediscovery.

It all started with the discovery of a certain style of tattooing: the Japanese. The Western adoption of the style had been initiated by the tattooist Sailor Jerry, who until today is considered one of the most influential and groundbreaking agents in the field. He had been taught the technique in Chicago and practised it as a merchant marine in World War II. During his deployment and travels in the Far East, he developed an interest in Asian imagery. Later in the 1960s when Sailor Jerry was owning a tattoo parlour in Honolulu, he engaged in a trade with the Japanese tattooist Horihide (Kazuo Oguri) and the Hong Kong tattooist Pinky Yun. He offered American machines and needles in exchange for their designs and their consultation. Exploring the Japanese style helped to launch the transformation of tattooing into a practice that would be rather tolerable for the middle class for two reasons. First of all, the Japanese style can be considered in terms of imagery and designs among the most stunning exercisings of the practice. Moreover, it incorporates a very unique way of using the body: the designs cover it almost as a full suit. The imagery is highly artistic and does not only very elaborately depict a central image but illustrates a very detailed background as well. Therefore the Japanese style enjoyed much more acknowledgement as an “artistic”

⁴⁶ Cf. De Mello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 74.

⁴⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 71.

expression than any other style in Western societies. Secondly, it represented stylistically and thematically the very opposite of the American tattooing that moreover had been connotated with tattooing as it was practised by the working class and the deviants of society.⁴⁸ Through this aesthetic difference tattoos started to appeal more to the middle class, and at the same time marked their difference from the working class.

Another aspect that paved the way for tattooing towards middle class is a social and political one: the transformations the US society underwent during the 1960s including the Vietnam War, the peace movement, Civil Rights and Black Power movements and the second wave of feminism. In the course of these events and developments, new imagery appeared in tattooing related to the new counter-movements, like peace symbols, zodiac signs, marijuana leaves, etc. Due to that relation to the counter and liberation movements tattooing started to be used as a form of rebellion among the apostate or at least discontent members of the middle class as it had been used by the Bikers and other marginalized groups. Also, tattoos would start to appear on the bodies of representatives and celebrities of the counterculture, which made the practice even more visible and attractive to a new audience. Consequently, tattoos reached new popularity in the 1970s and ceased to be a rarity only to be found on the bodies of marginalized underdogs.⁴⁹

Naturally, the encounter of the old working-class practice and its new audience had an impact on tattooing and how it was practised. Firstly and as already indicated before the imagery was broadened once more with the arrival of a new subgroup in the tattoo community. But the changes were not merely stylistic. Since one of the reasons for the negative perceptions of tattooing in the middle class was the high risk of infection due to the poor hygienic standards this issue had to be tackled to make the practice more attractive to the new audience. Especially tattooist Lyle Tuttle made great efforts in order to improve the sanitation by developing guidelines and equipment to simplify sterilization. His techniques of using easily changeable tubes and needles as well as using discardable ink containers for each customer became a standard, that is still valid until today.⁵⁰

The improvement of the sanitary conditions in tattooing represents a crucial step towards the professionalization of tattooing and consequently to its appeal to the middle

⁴⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 73-75.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

class. As mentioned before there is a series of characteristics that are required for tattooing to be considered tolerable for the middle class. We can summon all those characteristics under the term professionalism. For the middle class to accept tattooing it has to be executed in a professional way. Hygienic standards represent a very basic, but profoundly important aspect of that.

Another one of these aspects is the qualification of the tattooist. Today usually tattooists are referred to as tattoo artists and it seems like an almost naturally given appellation. But it is far from that. The implied acknowledgement of tattooing as an art form is the result of the efforts of tattooists to alter and improve the image of the practice and to make it more appealing to a whole new and more sophisticated audience than from where tattooing originally had its roots in the West: the working class and marginalized groups.

The most outstanding figure in this whole process was Ed Hardy, who gained prominence even in spheres that are completely detached from tattooing. In any case, Ed Hardy alongside other influential tattooists as Don Nolan, Cliff Raven, Spider Webb and Zeke Owens professionalized tattooing to a whole new degree and paved the practice's way into the middle class. Hardy having had a great interest in tattooing ever since his childhood learned the trade as a graduate from the San Francisco Art Institute with the Japanese-style tattooist Samuel Steward (Phil Sparrow). Due to his interest, Hardy started a correspondence with Sailor Jerry and later even went to Japan to work with Kazuo Oguri. After having acquired both the knowledge and the technical skills he opened the first custom-only and by-appointment tattoo shop in the United States. A concept that shaped tattooing until today. Hardy's agenda to explore and promote tattooing as an art form led him to launch the tattoo magazine *Tattoo Time* in order to document and spread trends and styles of tattooing as well as a new understanding of the practice. His idea of tattooing as an art form caused the necessary shift of the middle-class's perception of tattooing for its members to embrace it.⁵¹

Therefore, we can conclude that the second necessary characteristic for tattooing to be considered tolerable and / or appealing to the middle class is its link to art. Just like Ed Hardy a lot of art graduates would enter the trade with their affinity and talents for drawing and new designs, which spurred the process of developing a new and way broader range of styles.

⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

Their sophisticated background of an education in art theory naturally guaranteed them even more credibility in the middle class.⁵²

Finally, another important aspect that helped to alter the perception of tattooing roots in a different understanding of its meaning. That new idea of the meaning of the practice came along with the advent of tribalism, a style that is adapted from the tribal designs as from tribes from Samoa, Borneo, Hawaii and New Zealand and that was mainly initiated by Hawaiian Filipino tattooist Leo Zulueta, who was strongly supported and promoted by Ed Hardy. With the exploration of pre-technological techniques of the practice and its cultural roots emerged the idea that tattooing is an instinctive human behaviour and that it is simply and essentially in our nature to mark ourselves. This notion gave a whole new perspective towards tattooing and a meaning that was soon embraced by the middle class.⁵³

This new understanding of tattooing as a meaningful practice helped its appeal to the middle class for two reasons: First of all, the connotation of tattooing with its roots in tribal cultures where it often served meaningful and/or even spiritual functions gave tattooing a perspective that appeared to the members of mainstream Western societies, that were experienced as spiritually empty, as a way to reconnect with a deeper human nature and spiritualism.⁵⁴ Again, we have to consider the bigger socio-cultural picture: the fall of Christianity has left a spiritual void, that many sought to fill turning towards notions of other cultures as we find it especially in the New Age movement.

But this new meaning of tattooing did not only give the practice a whole new and more sophisticated and artistic dimension: it also created a distance to its roots and history as a working-class practice.⁵⁵ While tattooing in this course is reconnected with its exotic roots, we cannot consider this trend the return of the tattoo to the mark of the exotic, though. As I have elaborated before, tattooing as an exotic practice enjoyed curiosity and fascination in the European societies, but at the same time, we shall not forget, that it was as well a mark of something significantly and inherently different, the mark of the other. What we are dealing with concerning the reinterpretation of tattooing in the middle class under the notion of its exotic and tribal roots is not treating the practice and wearers as a curiosity. Instead, through embedding tattooing and the act of getting a tattoo within the spiritual and ritualistic realm,

⁵² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 84.

⁵³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 86-89.

⁵⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 90.

the tattoo develops into a means of self-expression and/or affirmation. Despite the exotic connotation the tattoo thus regained, it does not represent the mark of the exotic and it is rather read as a mark of the self.

Detached from its original Western roots in working-class clientele and marginalized groups tattooing started to enjoy much more respectability and the professionalization of the trade helped to make it appeal to a middle-class audience. Moreover, this phenomenon created a whole new standard in terms of technique, sanitation and artistic skills that started to be more and more unattainable for tattooists from the working class. Naturally, those new requirements made tattooing significantly more expensive and less accessible to its former most important audience, the middle class. At the same time, it created as well a stigma on the “old way” of tattooing. A very illustrative example is the disregard of the tradition of the self-trained tattooist. While in the “golden age” of tattooing in the West basically, every tattooist was an autodidact, self-trained tattooists are considered “scratchers” ever since the reinvention of tattooing in the middle class and understood as a danger towards clients as well as the image of tattooing in general.⁵⁶

All in all, we can see how tattooing made its appeal to the middle class, but also how in turn it had to change to comply with middle-class standards. This is how the tattoo community split and is now divided by class and status. This is how the notion of a “right”, a legitimate and tolerable way of tattooing spread and how the practice could cross the social borders into the middle class - under the transformation into a practice that was clearly different from its working-class context. The ultimate consequence is the above mentioned fragmentation of the tattoo community.

We have seen how tattooing has fulfilled several social functions and has served as several semiotic representations, from the mark of deviance, resistance and individuality. This whole phenomenon is a complex process in which we will find several mechanisms of power at work. Understanding those mechanisms will reveal our ostensibly utmost self, our body, as the disciplined object as well as the contested subject, that it is. It will also help us understand how tattooing until today is the subject of a battle over its meaning, culture and execution.

⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 110.

3. Tattooing as the Inscription of Power, Class and Resistance

We have seen the development of tattooing in the West since it's rediscovery and have traced it until its contemporary form of appearance. Before proceeding with the philosophical analysis of this development I shall briefly summarize the most important findings, that will play a significant role in that endeavour:

1. Tattooing found its way back into Western consciousness through the academic discourse of the time of the Enlightenment in the course of the discoveries.
2. After a first phase of curiosity about the practice and its exotism within the bourgeoisie, tattooing was rapidly embraced by the working class and rejected by the middle class. Within the latter, the practice started to carry a high stigma and a strong association with deviance.
3. In several social groups, tattooing has served as an expression of subversion. This, in turn, reinforced the negative image of tattooing in the middle class and its association with deviance.
4. Slowly the practice was adopted by the middle class, but only under the condition of its transformation. Tattooing had to change in its exercise as well as in its constructed/supposed meaning in order to comply with middle-class notions about the body.
5. The consequence of the middle class appropriating tattooing and its reinterpretation has fragmented the tattoo community. Its discourse reflects that fragmentation as well as a battle over the membership and the meaning of the practice.

This chapter is dedicated to the aim of understanding philosophically this process in its entirety, assuming that it must be related to certain notions of the human body that I will examine with recourse to Foucault. Central to my analysis will be the notion of the inscription of bodies, that entails the idea that our body is not only to be considered in its physiological existence but as well as a surface on which our social realities are inscribed. What is underlying is the idea that the socio-political situation in which individuals can find themselves have a constitutive impact on them and how they experience themselves and their bodies. Foucault has written extensively on this exact problem, namely on how these

relations of power, that is to say, the totality of socio-political conditions in all their complexity shape individuals and their subjectivity.

I state the hypothesis, that the entire development of tattooing in the West since its rediscovery is explicable taking into account the relations of power that have been at work historically and analysed by Foucault. Those power relations represent a complex network of knowledge, technologies, institutions and discourse and they are all centred around the body. Whence the notion of the inscription of bodies. Against this theoretical background, we will be able to understand tattooing as in fact a problem of power and subjectivity. With this insight, the entire development of tattooing in Western societies since its rediscovery that at first glance seems rather puzzling will be actually comprehensible. My analysis will be concerned with three main problems, that arise with the insights from the cultural history of the practice in the West:

1. How could tattooing be embraced by the working class while it was strongly rejected by the middle class? This suggests, that depending on their class affiliation individuals relate differently to their bodies. This assumption is supported by the fact that tattooing had to transform before it could be adopted by the middle class into a practice compliant with its notions and norms.
2. How could tattooing later be embraced by the middle class as a mainstream phenomenon while it was previously strongly rejected by it?
3. If we assume that bodies are inscribed by the relations of power that are surrounding it, is there a possibility of a counterinscription, that would require individuals being able to develop agency over their own bodies?

These three problems indicate the importance of three notions that will be of relevance for the following chapter and thoroughly examined, namely *power*, *class*, and *resistance*.

The less obvious, but maybe the most important one, can be considered *power*. Its relevance becomes clearer once one has understood Foucault's notion of it and how it supports the assumption that it can be considered the main motor of the history of tattooing. It is important to comprehend that when talking about power, Foucault does not refer to a form

of government or a political structure.⁵⁷ Foucault considers power a general *technique*, that penetrates the entire social body and will manifest itself even in its smallest entities. It is present in every form of relationship a human being can possibly have where “one person tries to control the other”⁵⁸ and where there is (even if not recognizable at first sight) an effect that determines or at least influences an individual’s behaviour. The fact that tattooing, even though legally never prohibited, was not performed by certain parts of society strongly indicates that there must be a mechanism of power at work that caused exactly this effect.

In this very observation, we can already find the relevance of the second notion, namely *class*. The fact that it was certain parts of society that did not perform the practice of tattooing, and this certain part of society is mainly represented by the middle class (or up), strongly suggests that class affiliation must play a certain role in that development and in how people relate to their bodies. We can even state that the history of tattooing as it could be observed since its rediscovery is also very much a history of class, as chapter 2 has shown and as will be thoroughly analyzed in the following chapter. Since this thesis is dedicated to developing a thorough understanding of the practice of tattooing I will derive the definition of the middle class for this thesis from what seemingly divides the tattoo community and thus, constitutes a social border within it, according to the observations made by DeMello. Ownership and income levels are, according to her findings, not very conclusive about class status in the tattoo community and I believe these factors in general decreasingly conclusive when it comes to determining class affiliation. The factor main dividing factor she has found to be determining is college education, although she concedes that this definition is not entirely satisfying as a person’s life experience and personal background are more complex than his or her educational background could depict.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the reference to the education background of a person as an indicator for class affiliation is not entirely inadequate in the context of tattooing. As I will thoroughly show in this chapter, one of the significant and dividing factors in the development of tattooing has been *knowledge*. Therefore the impact of a person’s education should not be underestimated in this case as it indicates the type of knowledge, discourse, and notions a person is informed with.

⁵⁷ Foucault has changed and corrected his notion of power several times throughout his work. I will refer to his late version of the concept of power that he used in his late texts from the 80’s.

⁵⁸ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 292.

⁵⁹ Cf. De Mello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 7.

Another notion of relevance that is already suggested by the history of tattooing in the West is *resistance*. As we have seen in chapter 2, it has occurred that tattooing in Western societies has assumed the function of expressing subversion and resistance against mainstream values and lifestyle. This purpose of tattooing is quite unique. In the cultural history of tattooing, the practice has served a great range of different purposes, as chapter 2 has shown. Its function of subversion though is quite specific to our modern Western societies. As we will see in the following chapter this is very much related to the relations of power that are underlying them and the disciplinary structure they have produced.

3.1 The Inscription of Bodies

The body is the material and physical anchor of our existence, it is or has been considered the vessel of our soul, it is an apparatus carrying out physical, mechanical and biological functions, it has been dissected, studied, observed, treated. But the domain of the body is not an exclusively physiological one. The human body always finds itself within a certain social reality, within a specific historical context. To understand this relation between the body and its social surrounding is a central matter of theorizing the body. It is within this context, in the pursuit of comprehending this relation, that we often find the notion of the inscription of the body.

In poststructural theory, but more importantly for this thesis in Foucault's philosophical work, the concept is to be comprehended in a metaphorical sense: when talking about bodily inscription, what is referred to is not actual body modifications as piercing, tattooing, etc. What is implied instead is the notion of the body as a surface upon which social reality is inscribed. This social reality can be understood as the sum of the social, political, economic and cultural circumstances in which the subject can find itself and which determine the way the subject constitutes and understands itself, the way it behaves and relates to itself and others, the way it perceives and uses its own life and body.

Foucault understood the necessity to investigate the body against the background of such historical developments, because "[...] the body [...] is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest in it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs."⁶⁰ What we find here in addition to the notion of bodies being inscribed by their surrounding social realities, is

⁶⁰ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of Prison*. New York: Random House, 1995 p. 25.

one of the main themes of Foucault's work: the investigation of relations of power as a driving force in the way an individual relates to its body. What is underlying this proposition though, is an even more profound notion of a connection between power and subjectivity.

In order to fully understand how these two notions are related it is worth to take a step back. Let us recall for a moment Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes' conclusion of her observation of sugarcane workers in Brazil. At first sight, it seems obvious and easily comprehensible that an individual's life, its subjectivity is shaped by its surrounding circumstances. Scheper-Hughes infers from her study of these workers' living conditions that the way they experience their body in exercising it in typical body practices that seem universal, like eating, sleeping, having sex, etc. actually vary from others according with their reality, that is to say social, cultural and political circumstances.⁶¹

In the beginning of her conclusion stands an observation that seems rather apparent if we just take into consideration the inequality of living conditions that humanity faces: Of course, a worker of whatever exploited industrial or agricultural employment in whatever low-income country lives a completely different life than an average member of the middle class of any European society, for instance.

It does not need much to acknowledge that the underlying inequality defining social, political and economic conditions must lead to an inequality of how we experience life and our body. Because it is the body through which we experience life and it is also first and foremost the body through which we experience the socio-economic and political reality surrounding us. This is quite an illustrative example of how social realities are inscribed on bodies. But what Foucault's hypothesis adds on this comprehension is that this is not random: The social reality being inscribed on a body is highly determined by underlying mechanisms of power, and the human body is constituted and produced as a result of them. In other words, our body is certainly subjected to physiology. But it is just as much subjected to history.

As I have already indicated above, Foucault's conceptualization of power goes way beyond its conventional understanding, which would mainly be based on the notion of power being possessed by the dominant class (or even smaller social entities), which once acquired it and is destined to preserve it. Foucault complexifies this common notion of power and

⁶¹ Cf. Scheper-Hughes, Nancy in: DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 140.

considers power a technique, namely one that “applies 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.”⁶² Thus, the main characteristic of power is its relation with subjectivity, that is to say, in Foucault’s words, it “makes individuals subjects”.⁶³ What does this mean? It means that the human subject cannot be understood as an unchangeable, unhistorical constant that consequently constitutes a human essence. Instead, what is constituted as the subject is determined by the surrounding relations of power. Importantly, Foucault considers the subject relevant in this matter in both its meanings as firstly, being something being subjected to something else, being controlled and dependent, and secondly, as a self-awareness, that is to say, the formation of an identity and a conscience.⁶⁴

What is implied through this double notion of the subject is the relational character of power. As much as the subject might be self-aware, it is also always confronted with other subjects, that it will be subject to. And, it is within these relations between subjects that Foucault locates power: “[...] in human relationships, whether they involve verbal communication [...], or amorous, institutional, or economic relationships, power is always present.”⁶⁵ Consequently, they are always and necessarily at work in whatever kind of society or culture. They vary of course, but they are always there.

Yet, we cannot simply say that power is sufficiently constituted where there is a relationship between two or more parties. As noted, power comes necessarily into play where there is a relation between subjects. What is presupposed additionally, is that in these relations there must be one person trying to exercise control over another person and its conduct. Thus, we can speak of power where there is a relation between two or more subjects and where there is an attempt of one controlling the other, which, according to Foucault, is the case in all human relationships, whether they are of economic, political, institutional, amorous, etc. nature.⁶⁶ The relational character of power is very defining for Foucault’s entire late notion of power because it implies that the attempt of exercising power can be found in

⁶² Foucault, Michel, “The Subject and Power“, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8/ nr. 4 (1982), p. 781.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 781.

⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 781.

⁶⁵ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. The Ethics of the Concern of Self as a Practice of Freedom*. New York: The New Press, 1997, pp. 291-292.

⁶⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

the other as well. This, in turn, implies that power relations are necessarily unstable and mobile as they are constantly contested between two or more parties. Thus, in their very core, the relations of power are constituted by the possibility of their revision.⁶⁷ What does this mean? It means that what is implied in this notion of power is the condition of freedom because in order to contest each other in a relation of power there has to be a certain degree of freedom on both parties. Both parties have to a certain realm of possible action and reaction. This conceptualization of power being constituted by freedom is rather remarkable as it opposes the most common and maybe instinctive notion of power that conceptualizes it rather as violence, force or at least coercion and consequently as the opposite of freedom. Foucault, on the contrary, assumes freedom as the very condition of power: “If one of them [the subjects] were completely at the other’s disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn’t be any relations of power.”⁶⁸

What is additionally defining for Foucault’s late notion of power, and this is related to the premise of the subjects being free, is that it does not act directly or immediately on those who are to be subjected. Instead, it acts upon their actions.⁶⁹ This means, power is more than the exercise of violence and forceful coercion. This is how Foucault’s conceptualizes power: in explicit opposition to violence because “[...] it forces, it bends, it breaks on the wheel, it destroys or it closes the door on all possibilities.”⁷⁰ This would imply that the dominated party is entirely exposed to the dominating party, its force and arbitrariness. But as power is exercised on *free* subjects the mode of action must be a different one, namely one that implies that “[...] ‘the other’ (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts [...]”⁷¹, a person that is free. Thus, a violent coercion cannot constitute power. Instead, it “incites, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject”⁷².

⁶⁷ Cf. Faustino, Marta, “Ethics of the Self as Practice of Freedom and Resistance in the late Foucault”, in: A. Marques & J. Sáàgua (eds.), *Essays on Values and Practical Rationality – Ethical and Aesthetical Dimensions*, Bern / Bruxelles / New York / Oxford / Warszawa, Wien, Peter Lang, 2018, p. 109.

⁶⁸ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 292.

⁶⁹ Cf. Foucault, Michel, “The Subject and Power“, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8/ nr. 4 (1982), p. 788.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 789.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 789.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 789.

These notions are determining for the whole conceptualization of power in Foucault's work: If we assume that we can only speak of power where it is exercised between free subjects and the mode of action is not one of force or violence, the focus of an analysis of power is entirely redefined. Once considering power in another sense than merely as a political structure or a form of government, understanding it as "a way of acting upon acting subject(s) by virtue of their acting or being capable of action"⁷³, the question arises of how exactly power manages to act upon the actions of those it has subjected, that is to say, what kind of techniques, instruments, and mechanisms allow power to manipulate and determine free subjects' conduct? Foucault has extensively studied those mechanisms throughout his work and it is also those mechanisms that I will examine in this thesis, presupposing that they are significant on why and how people get or do not get tattooed in our contemporary Western societies.

In the following I will outline the most important aspects of the social reality of our modern Western societies, and what are the relations of power underlying. I will pay attention to two main issues. First of all, how exactly does the inscription of bodies work? What kind of mechanisms are applied? This matter will be addressed in subsection 3.1.1. Secondly, why are they applied, that is to say, what is their purpose and the content of the inscription, what will be examined in subsection 3.1.2.

In doing so we will be able to give an answer to the first main problem that was raised by the puzzling development of tattooing in the West since its rediscovery, namely: how could tattooing be embraced by the working class while it was strongly rejected by the middle class?

3.1.1 The Disciplining of Bodies

First of all, I would like to point out the historical context that is central to Foucault's theoretical work, but that also interestingly enough coincides with the rediscovery of tattooing. We have seen that tattooing was rediscovered in the course of the expeditions and voyages to the "New World". Although not the first encounter with tattooed Natives, James Cook coming across the Tahitians was the one incident that caused the practice's return to the "Old World". As I have pointed out, it was the scholars accompanying the expedition who intrigued by their discovery engaged so much with it that they even got tattooed themselves.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 789.

On their bodies and through their discourse, as well as their highly detailed reproductions of motifs they had found, tattooing made its way back to Europe.

Cook's discovery dates back to the second half of the 18th century, the historical context of the *Enlightenment*: the dominating philosophical and intellectual movement of this period was based on a worldview rooted in reason. Embedded within this context navigators would set out on their expeditions together with scholars for them to study exotic fauna, flora, people, customs, etc., which added a whole scientific dimension to their voyages.

It is also the period that Foucault refers to as the *Classical Age*. This period is thoroughly examined in his work. It is a time that has witnessed a series of major political, economic, and social shifts, and Foucault considers them a significant origin of a series of structural features of our modern societies. Moreover, he also comprehends those shifts as highly related to the history of ideas. Consequently, the occurrence and domination of the Enlightenment shall not be considered a coincidence. It is embedded within the highly complex network of relations of power and the corresponding political, economic and social conditions of that time. We have to understand the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, within this very specific context of profound political transformations.

The main development of those transformations centre around is the emergence of the *modern state*. Since the 16th century it had been developing as a new form of political power, that has one quite unique characteristic: it is both an individualizing and totalizing form of power. This insight of Foucault's is remarkable as it opposes the widespread notion of the state power as overlooking individuals and vanishing them in its totalizing structures.⁷⁴

As suggested by Foucault, this focus on the totalizing aspects of the modern state fails to acknowledge a significant aspect involved in this new form of political power, and moreover one, whose repercussions are considerably important in order to understand how power applies on subjects in the modern state.

This individualizing tendency of the state power originates in the Christian institutions in the West and in what Foucault refers to as "pastoral power". In the practice of the Christian religion, the individual and its salvation is central. Whence the church's interest and attention paid to the individual, as well as their minds and souls as they are defining for its salvation. This type of power might have disappeared in the form of ecclesiastical

⁷⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 782.

institutions throughout the 18th century, but its function has not only remained, it has, on the contrary, spread through the entire social body.⁷⁵

Thus, from the focus on the individual that we can find in the pastoral power embedded in the religious structure of the church, has developed the modern state as a “very sophisticated structure, in which individuals can be integrated, under one condition: that this individuality would be shaped in a new form and submitted to a set of very specific patterns”⁷⁶. Contrary to the common notion, the individual is actually a significant concern of the state power. And even more, it has proliferated into a multitude of points of application on all levels of the social body and within its smallest entities: Foucault speaks of an “individualizing ‘tactic’ which characterized a series of power: those of the family, medicine, psychiatry, education and employers.”⁷⁷

Once we have understood this thorough and overall application of power, we begin to be able to comprehend that power actually manages to hold grip upon any subject and at any time, and moreover, it might even not be recognized. Its manifestation in the family, for instance, might seem to the concerned subjects as absolutely natural and given. What does this mean? It means that this type of power manages to effectively coerce individuals in such a subtle way, that it remains almost entirely unperceived to those being coerced. It does not rely on the use of violence or force. This is how we often envision power. But this notion is tremendously misleading. Power has a way more profound effect, where we do not notice it. This subtle way of exercising power is one of the most crucial characteristics that define the modern state and moreover, determines its success. As Foucault points out: “[...] power is only tolerable on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its mechanisms.”⁷⁸ In the modern state, this subtle way of exercising power is almost perfected as individuals unconsciously incorporate it in the form of rules of behaviour and being. It *disciplines* them. Power applies on its subjects in an almost entirely unperceived way that only increases its effect. It operates through a series of discourses, structures and mechanisms, that one can find on any level of the social body. In this way, every social entity transforms into an institution that can serve as a means of discipline, so

⁷⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 782-783.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 783.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 784.

⁷⁸ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987, p. 86.

much that Foucault refers to the European societies that have emerged since the 18th century and developed this very distinct exercise of power as *disciplinary societies*.⁷⁹ It is a defining historical moment when discipline develops into the most important mechanism of power and it has been of constitutive quality for the modern state. The result: “a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviours.”⁸⁰ The effect of the disciplines is immense. In perfect accordance with the subtle, highly unperceived exercise of power they succeed to produce what Foucault refers to as *docile bodies*, that is to say, bodies that are subjected and trained bodies, that meet certain requirements and conform to social norms and values. They are more capable and more obedient at the same time, which is produced by the very same mechanism, namely discipline using a series of techniques.⁸¹

I argue that this exercise of power as subtle and almost disguised coercion is crucial in order to understand the development of tattooing in contemporary Western societies. As mentioned, the practice has never been legally prohibited in any of them and yet, tattooing has been highly stigmatized as a deviant behaviour, thus keeping large parts of society from getting a tattoo and condemning those who were wearing one. It is thus relatively certain to assume that there must have been mechanisms of power at work that produced exactly this effect. Therefore I will take a more elaborate look into the disciplinary power that is so characteristic to the modern states and into the techniques it applies that I consider most relevant in the matter of tattooing.

As noted, with the emergence of the modern state and the related changes in the form and exercise of political power, Foucault observes two important embedded developments, that are the of individualization of power and the emergence of the body as a target of power. The operation of disciplinary power as we find it in European societies since the 18th century is thoroughly rooted in them. In the phenomenon of the individualization of power, we find the indication for where power is applied: on the individual. The main objective of organizing the masses in the most useful, efficient and productive way is carried out through a whole new attention directed at each and every subject, that is to say by breaking society down into its smallest units (the individuals), where disciplinary mechanisms are applied. In the case of

⁷⁹ Cf. Foucault, Michel, “The Subject and Power“, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8/ nr. 4 (1982), p. 788.

⁸⁰ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of Prison*. New York: Random House, 1995 p. 138.

⁸¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 83.

the body as a new target of power, we find an indication implied of how power is exercised upon individuals, and this is upon or through the body. Foucault notes a significant change in the value and importance of the body through the Classical Age. He retraces that transformation through an analysis of the penal system, that is very illustrative of that shift.

It is way too extensive and not relevant enough for this work to follow the details of this transformation, but it is useful to draw at least a comparison in order to demonstrate how political reality manifests itself in the body. Being confronted today with the techniques of torture as practised before the 18th century that were all designated to inflict as much pain and suffering as possible, it seems utterly incomprehensible how the human body could be violated to such an extent. Foucault refers to Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer's analysis of punishment against its social background which concludes that within that specific social context the human body simply did not enjoy the same value as is it did later in a system of production where the body was invested with an enormously high commercial value due to its utility as labour force in the industrial economy.⁸² Additionally, Foucault relates the phenomenon of the violation of the human body to a general familiarity of death. The historical period we are talking about is one marked by hunger, disease, epidemics, an extremely high child mortality rate and an overall precarity. Consequently, death seemed way more proximate than it seems under our conditions today, and "gave rise to rituals [that] intended to integrate it, to make it acceptable and to give a meaning to its permanent aggression"⁸³.

This is the socio-economic context we have to consider. What we have to mind on top of that, according to Foucault, to fully understand the extent of the violability of the body, is the function of torture and public executions: its purpose to show power being exercised and to retaliate visibly on the body of the condemned, which turns into "the anchoring point for a manifestation of power, an opportunity of affirming the dissymmetry of forces"⁸⁴. We see that the application of a certain form of punishment, and intertwined with that the significance and meaning of the body, is to be traced back to the underlying relations of power.

As established above, it is our body where materiality holds grip upon us and in the context of the public executions and tortures before the 18th century we find the human body

⁸² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 54.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

already reduced in its value due to the socio-economic circumstances and the permanent proximity of death, being violated in order to show power in operation and to express in this physical confrontation its superiority. As the form of political power changed, so did the importance of the body and how power was exercised upon it. It ceased to be a confrontation of physical force and capacity and under the objective of the regulation of the masses of bodies constituting the population with the use of their maximum utility and productivity it transformed into the more subtle disciplinary mechanisms, that I will elaborate on more profoundly later.

Their effects are not aimed at retaliation but on subjection. As briefly indicated above, central to this new disciplinary power is the notion of docility: the idea of a docile body, “that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved”⁸⁵. The endeavour of this control over bodies entailed several new aspects: Firstly, the scale of the control changed from the mass towards the individual body as its target. Secondly, its objective would be the economy and efficiency of the body. Thirdly, its modality required constant and neverending coercion.⁸⁶ Docility can be understood as the main objective of the entire technology of the body: that is to be able to control each and every individual while maximizing and exploiting its utility.

Before I elaborate on the mechanisms of disciplinary power and how they are not only crucial to the exercise of power of the modern state but also explanatory when it comes to the matter of tattooing and its development in the West, I want to point out three general instruments of disciplinary power that can be considered a manifestation of the general tactic of the individualization of power, that is, they are applied not on the social body as whole, but on each and every of its subjects. Those instruments are *hierarchical observation*, *normalizing judgement*, and the combination of those two, which would be *examination*.

Observation: One of the main means applied would be observation. It is based on the effect of coercion that derives from the visibility of those who are to be dominated.⁸⁷ The mechanism is simple: Where there is an observation of the individual there is its obedience. The effect is very well illustrated by Foucault with his concept of Panopticism. It is based on a simple bilateral relation. There is the individual, that is to be subjected. For that sake, it has to be both individualized (as provoked by the means described before) and constantly visible

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁸⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 137.

⁸⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 171.

(through observation). On the other side, there is who or whatever that observes and the very crux of the success of this technique is its invisibility. There does not even have to be an actual observation. Only the suggestion that there might be is sufficient to control the individual's behaviour. So even if the surveillance is not permanent, its effects are.⁸⁸ This allows power to be both indiscreet and discreet at the very same time. Indiscreet, because its gaze is directed at everything and all the time, and discreet because its operation is based on the very characteristic of functioning silently and invisibly. The consequence is the capability of power to control the body without the use of force or violence.⁸⁹ Moreover, the fact that the coercive effect operates based on the principle of invisibility and additionally that therefore its actual exercise is not necessary and only its suggestion is sufficient results in this relation of power always sustaining itself because it is of no more importance who exercises the power or what kind of motives he has. Power is perfectly automatized.⁹⁰

Normalizing Judgement: Another mechanism that is central to the success of disciplinary power is based on creating a constant awareness of each individual that every deviance from what is considered correct behaviour will result in some sort of punishment - their severity carefully calculated. The aim is for "each subject to find himself caught in a punishable, punishing universality"⁹¹, which means that every individual has to internalize that everything that is deviant or non-conforming is to be judged and ultimately punished. What is underlying is the notion of an order - of an order that is both of natural and of artificial / juridical nature: The former implying that there is some sort of natural measurement considering whatever behaviour is at stake, the latter representing the legal correspondence determining through laws and regulations the very corpus of correctness rendering everything that lays outside unacceptable and punishable.⁹² Moreover, the entire endeavour of punishment is directed so much towards the aim of the production of correct behaviour that its very exercise is not determined to retaliate but to train, that is to say, when confronted with an offence, its punishment is still pervaded by the overall objective of productiveness. Punishment, therefore, mostly takes the form of exercise and training in order to correct the individual's behaviour instead of just punishing its deviance.⁹³ Furthermore,

⁸⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

⁸⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 177.

⁹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 202.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁹² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 179.

⁹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 179-180.

punishment represents only one part of the whole strategy of discipline. Its correspondence would be what Foucault refers to as gratification: the rewarding of positive behaviour (opposing the punishment of negative behaviour). What this strategy implies is that behaviour will be judged on a quantifiable scale between a positive and a negative pole. The consequence is that the subjects caught up in that mechanism will find themselves hierarchized by their behaviour and judged based on that scale and in relation to each other. But individuals are not only hierarchized according to their behaviour but also in their abilities. The entire mechanism is therefore integrated into the cycle of knowledge of individuals”⁹⁴, that is to say, in order to perfectly exercise this strategy it is necessary to know as much as possible of each and every subject that is to be subjected by it. In this very mechanism lies the importance of the rank. It incorporates a double role: on the one hand, it rewards by hierarchizing the individuals according to their skills, abilities and the conformity of their behaviour, but on the other hand, it punishes by its very own judgemental nature.⁹⁵ Those are the five strategies that disciplinary power works with: it *compares* (individual behaviour to a suggested measure), *differentiates* (individuals according to their performance that will be judged by its compliance to what is expected), *hierarchizes* (the individuals by their value that is the sum of their abilities and obedience), *homogenizes* (towards conformity) and *excludes* (behaviour that is beyond those limits of conformity). This entire mechanism is the very nature of the norm: “The Normal is established as a principle of coercion”⁹⁶. The effect is that the subject will find itself always in comparison to a suggested norm and it is this implied normality that entails membership to the social body, just as, the other way around its deviance will result in exclusion. Whence the coercive effect of the norm.

Examination: Those first two mechanisms - observation and normalization - are combined in the examination: it renders the subject visible and departing from that differentiates and hierarchizes it. It is within the examination where we find the manifestation of “the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected”⁹⁷. The examination allows to produce knowledge of the individual and thus its obedience. Instead of being coerced by the deterrent effect of power exercising atrocity to

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 181.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.

display its forces, the individual is caught up in a constant coercion by being objectified as an object of power and knowledge. This is, concludes Foucault, where the human sciences emerged from: from the necessity of producing knowledge of individuals in order to subject them.⁹⁸

We have seen now the instruments disciplinary power operates on. But how exactly are they applied? Those general techniques have produced a series of quite specific mechanisms that discretely coerce individuals because they operate in disguise. As mentioned above, we tend to envision power as a form of government, as a political structure: altogether in a juridical sense. We believe power to be exercised through law and if necessary force. This notion carries quite a deceiving potential, because it diverts our attention from a form of power that is applied on us way more subtly, but therefore as well more effectively precisely because it is applied in disguise: in the form of the disciplines, knowledge, and institutions that we hardly recognize as such because they are not part of the legal apparatus, but part of our everyday life. They are embedded in society as integral parts and do not appear as an alien application of power or force with an apparent coercive agenda. They manifest themselves in economy, politics, science and the smallest entities of society as in the family, in the classroom, at the workplace, etc.

As such, the disciplines as a means to control individual behaviour in the social body are firmly incorporated in our daily life. They are based on a regulation of several aspects of it, namely the distribution of individuals in space (in a functional, particular and hierarchized manner), of time (as with time tables) and people's behaviour and activity (as through training and surveillance). Those aspects are crucial for the way society is organized.⁹⁹ We are so used to take a functional place in society, to perform our duties at a certain time and within a certain amount of time using our bodies in a certain way that it seems natural to us. We hardly ever question it and even less are we aware that it is not natural, but power applied to coerce a certain desired behaviour.

I want to examine this process in detail because it is more than significant in our endeavour to understand the development of tattooing in the West since its rediscovery. Let us remind again that tattooing has never been legally prohibited in Western countries, unlike

⁹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 187-192.

⁹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 141-167.

in Japan. After the outbreaks of hepatitis due to the poor hygiene in the tattoo parlours, there have been some restrictions, but it has never come to a full legal ban. What kept people or at least the middle class, from the practice was not the law, but the not at all less coercive technology of the norm. As explained above, the disciplinary mechanism causes the individual to internalize that the entire realm of non-conformity is punishable. It is based on the idea of an order, one that is incorporating an artificial (laws, regulations, prohibitions) and a natural (observable processes) reference. It is this order, that defines what is considered normal and therefore acceptable, and at the very same time, it determines everything beyond its limits, everything that is deviant as abnormal, and therefore reproachable and even punishable.¹⁰⁰

Based on the operation of comparison, differentiation, hierarchization, homogenization, and exclusion the norm generates its coercive effect.¹⁰¹ It turns out to be one of the main strategies of power that would allow it to always sustain itself and its success has been significant. Foucault considers it even as a new form of “law”, one that roots in the combination of legality and nature in order to construct suggested normality. It results in a constant binary division that shapes our reality: where there is the assumption of sanity, there is the constitution of madness, where there is defined innocence, there is the determination of guilt and where there is suggested normality, everything else is rendered abnormal.¹⁰² Thus, we can only think deviance, where we have been thinking a norm before. It is this suggestion of normality that forms a measure against which we are both judged and judging others and that brings its coercive effect into play in our most basic everyday life and relations. And, not surprisingly, it is the very same effect that is at work when it comes to tattooing, at least in our Western society and especially in the middle class.

If one had to narrow down the most common objections against tattooing, one would find that they are all centred around the notion of normality. Interestingly, we can find the norm at work in middle-class tattooing in two ways: First of all, and more obviously, it rendered the practice of tattooing deviant. The effect was even reinforced with the exotification of the tattoo, as well as with its embracement by the working class and the outcasts of society. As we have seen, tattooing was after the first wave of curiosity of the

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁰¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 183.

¹⁰² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 199.

bourgeoisie only to be found on the bodies of captured natives that were displayed in travelling freak shows or on the body of sailors and soldiers: two groups, the primitive and the precarity of society, two groups that represented the very other and from which was always created a social distance. As mentioned, the bourgeoisie that first was enchanted by the practice, so much that even members of the royal houses would get tattooed, abandoned it when it spread in the working class. This phenomenon is perfectly explicable if we take into account the operation of the norm as suggested by Foucault. It also helps to comprehend the subsequent general detestation of tattooing in the middle class. Tattooing had become the sign of deviance, of abnormality, and additionally that of the lower classes. And we can see, how it was the association with those groups (the primitive and the working class) that gave tattooing the semiological meaning of deviance. At the same time, once this association was implemented, the sign would mark its wearer deviant.

Secondly, and even more striking is how the very same mechanism works into another direction, after the appropriation of tattooing and its transgression into the middle class: under the conditions and the transformation we have examined in chapter 2.2.3, the practice finally made its way into middle class and there again, the norm establishes a duality. Barbara Ehrenreich observes in her book *Fear of Falling: The inner Life of the Middle Class* the phenomenon of journalists, scholars and media in general to base their claims on a standardization of their values and culture, that would be that of the middle class. The effect is that what is visible is just the class (and consequently its values) of the speaking. The middle class that provides only a fragment of society is universal in its representation, which results in “a social norm ... from which every other group or class is ultimately a kind of deviation”¹⁰³.

This means that the very mechanism that rendered tattooing deviant for a long time in the middle class, the norm, now stipulates a new division of normal and abnormal, or in other words legitimate and illegitimate, that goes right through the tattoo community and splits it into fractions along the borders of the classes: tattooing is subordinated to a new norm, that produces once more a division into an acceptable (norm complying) form of the practice and one that is to be considered not acceptable determined by its deviance from the norm.

¹⁰³ Ehrenreich, Barbara, in: DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 5.

As mentioned, a substantial instrument for the success of discipline in its coercion of individuals is the examination which represents, let us remind, the combination of the two other main instruments, the techniques of an observing hierarchy and the normalizing of judgement. It renders the individual visible through the observation and through the implementation of a classification it differentiates and judges it.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, what the examination generates is a corpus of knowledge, a knowledge of the individual, of the body. This is, according to Foucault, the birth hour of the *human sciences*. They constitute a technique of power that is maybe even less obvious than the norm. Foucault considers power and knowledge directly implying each other, meaning that one necessarily produces the other. Where there is a target of power, there is the implementation of knowledge. It is through knowledge that power manages to direct and control individuals: because we act according to what we know, what we have learned. Power subjects us through knowledge because it has the capacity to use “[...] the ‘mind’ as a surface of inscription, with semiology as its tool; [and consequently] the submission of bodies through the control of ideas.”¹⁰⁵ How so? Knowledge can be produced on any matter and among its effects, there will always be a coercive one, as knowledge always produces also a norm, that is to say a (suggested) normality, “scientifically” justified and legitimized. The type of power produced correlates with the type of power underlying. As Foucault states: “Another power, another knowledge.”¹⁰⁶ So, what is designating for the type of knowledge in the modern state? Its incorporation of the disciplinary power, its techniques of observation and normalization, its thorough need to differentiate and classify, that resulted in the emergence of the human sciences. “These sciences, which have so delighted our ‘humanity’ for over a century, have their technical matrix in the petty, malicious minutiae of the disciplines and their investigations.”¹⁰⁷ This was the birth hour of psychology, psychiatry, criminology, pedagogy, all of them determined to study human behaviour and by that establish a norm against which everyone will be measured and judged. It is within the examination (main method of the human sciences) where we find the utmost manifestation of the general tendency of individualization in the

¹⁰⁴ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of Prison*. New York: Random House, 1995 p. 184.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

disciplinary apparatus. As Foucault observes: “As power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized.”¹⁰⁸

We have seen already the coercive effect of the norm and it is the human sciences, that we can understand as the tool that produces those norms in the form of knowledge: As the sciences that have the human being as their subject, they establish a corpus of knowledge that describes human behaviour. But it is not a mere description that is produced. In addition, it generates an average, a norm. It establishes the notion of normal behaviour, even of normal individuals. We have seen how norms generate a binary division between “normal” and “abnormal” and it is the human sciences that produce the equivalent knowledge and thus form the scientific instrument to exercise the perpetual examination of the individual and contribute to its coercion with the means of knowledge. This is the very interface of power and knowledge. That is to say, with the emergence of the human sciences, with the production of knowledge of man, of the individual, of the body and its functions, comes the production of its subjection. With their production of normality to measure us against, with the constant examination of each individual comes a coercive effect.

I have shown how the norm plays a major part in the development of tattooing: how it first rendered the practice deviant and then, after the appropriation of the middle class it again implemented another binary division that would render a certain form of the practice deviant. What we can also find is the operation of human sciences in that process as exactly the instrument as I have described it above. Let us remind the history of the tattooing. The practice was discovered and mentioned on several expeditions throughout the European explorations, but only the encounter of Cook’s crew with tattooed natives in Tahiti provoked sincere and persistent attention in Europe. As mentioned, what differed this encounter from others before was the Academics that had accompanied the exploration in the historical context of the Enlightenment. It was their interest and curiosity that caused themselves and other members of the crew to even get tattooed by the natives. It was them transporting the practice on their very own skin back into the “Old World” and society’s awareness. Following the development of this academic attention, one will notice a shift. As we have seen in the notes of Sydney Parkinson, Cook’s ship doctor, early texts on the practice are descriptive reports on its execution. With the continuation of the explorations and the scientific interest, European travellers would start to examine the different techniques, catalogize styles and

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

motifs and investigate the ritual and cultural contexts surrounding tattooing overseas. The fascination for the “New World” and its exotism would not only remain in exclusively academic realms and the topic would also call attention in the literature in general. The French traveller and romancier Max Radiguet tells the story of a session of tattooing in *The Last of the Savages*:

“Tohutai sat on the ground, his chest thrown back, and pressed his head against the knees of a Kanak, who held him steady. The tattooist knelt beside him, using a small mallet to pierce his skin with the sharpened tips of a comb he would dip, from time to time, in dye. Thus hammered, the comb made its way between Tohutai’s temples, tracing a bloody halo across his brow. A second line, which crossed his face horizontally, joined his two ears, passing just under his lower eyelids. Despite his jutting features, the shortness of the comb, and the need to immerse it in dye, these two line were flawlessly steady and parallel. They marked the outer edge of a series of closely-spaced hatchings all slanting the same way which, taken together, formed the beginning of a broad band across his eyes that was meant to make them stand out.”¹⁰⁹

The European interest is evident and can be easily put into the context of the general fascination for the exotic. As I have pointed out before, we have to comprehend though, that this interest, the entire notion of the exotic and the primitive has to be understood as strongly associated with “the other”. All this attention to these newly discovered people and their practices was attention to something that is representing something inherently different from the own culture. This confrontation would be only reinforced with the actual colonization and imperialism, that would entail the Europeans imposing their own culture and values on the Natives. Indeed, one can witness that with the colonization and the contact with missionaries tattooing gradually started to disappear even among the tribes as it was considered an intolerable and punishable pagan habit.¹¹⁰ As we can see, the early curiosity for tattooing as an exotic practice already carried within itself the notion of the other, of the deviant that would be incorporated into the general idea of the Primitive. This practice, being considered inherently deviant, would immediately be subjected to the disciplinary and coercive effect of the norm as it faced the confrontation of the European colonizers and their cultural domination.

¹⁰⁹ Radiguet, Max in: Pierrat, Jérôme, *The Little Book of Knowledge: Tattoos*. San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2017, p. 12.

¹¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 13.

What is even more striking is the development of the scientific discourse surrounding tattooing as the practice was embraced in the European societies and spread in the working-class milieus. It is exactly in this historical moment that the human sciences discover their interest in tattooing. As we have found before in the context of the rediscovery of tattooing descriptive texts on the techniques, the ingredients of the ink, the motifs and symbols of the designs, now we find examinations of the practice in a whole new light. Medicine, Psychiatry and Criminology would not investigate tattooing as a primitive practice, but as an indicator for mental deficiencies, disease and criminal tendencies, in general as a mark of deviant behaviour.

We have seen how the norm rendered tattooing abnormal, we have seen the coercive mechanisms at work that made a legal ban on the practice unnecessary. The take of the human sciences on the topic can be considered an additional instrument of this coercion. They would establish what is to be considered normal behaviour and consequently render tattooing abnormal, whether as a health hazard, the manifestation of a mental disease or a criminal tendency and danger to society.

3.1.2 The Politics of the Body

The knowledge of the body that was produced through the human sciences is a very particular one and its content is far from being a matter of chance. Looking into tattooing in the West there are two striking aspects, as I have pointed out at the beginning of this chapter: First, what is puzzling, is how fast the initial curiosity about the newly rediscovered practice vanished and how rapidly tattooing was reinterpreted as a mark of deviance indicating a proneness to criminality and mental disorders. We have seen already how the human sciences and their production of norms supported this process. What remains unanswered though, is why? This, I believe, can be explained by the content of the knowledge of the body, that they produced. Secondly, the fact that the practice was very much embraced by the working class while in the middle class it was turning into a mark of deviance, and moreover, the fact that the spreading of tattooing in the former, only reinforced the rejection of the latter, suggests depending on their class affiliation bodies are both invested in different ways in political terms, and related to subjectively.

As mentioned, the Classical Age was characterized by a series of great and extremely profound political, economic, social and cultural transformations. The development of the

many feudal states on the European continent into modern, national states is the most apparent and maybe what can be considered the superordinate conversion. It caused a broad range of secondary transformations that went through the entire social body. One of those was the emergence of a form of power that is at the same time individualizing and totalizing and developed a series of mechanisms and techniques that would discipline the individual to a certain behaviour. The desired behaviour, the norms and the type of knowledge coercing that behaviour, in turn, would reflect the present relations of power, that necessarily are constantly underlying, but also always in flux.

What happened along with the transformation from feudal states into modern national states, was a profound shift in the form of political power and how it was exercised. One of the many secondary changes caused by that is what Foucault considers a “shift in the right of death”¹¹¹. As Foucault points out, the right of death was a very central privilege of power, namely the power of the sovereign. It was the sovereign who had the almost unimpeachable right of deciding over life and death. But as the relations of power changed along with the emergence of the modern state, there was consequently a shift in this right as well. It would no longer be rooted in sovereign power and its right to defend itself, but on the contrary, it would be based on the newly constituted social body and its right to “ensure, maintain or develop its life.”¹¹²

This, the guarantee of the survival of the social body, the preservation of life, would be the new, superordinate and directive aim of power and any norm, knowledge or discipline deriving from it. This is a significantly profound transformation as it basically reverses the direction of the right of death. While in the feudal system power would lay in a sovereign and who therefore had the right to end life in order to maintain his and his power, now in the modern state power derives from the social body. Accordingly, for power to be preserved what has to be ensured is the existence of a population.

Under this historical revision, the human body gained a whole new value. Its repercussions are so profound that Foucault considers it a shift that also inaugurated an entirely new era of *body politics*. This new value of the body manifests itself in numerous aspects. We find it even mirrored in the form of punishment. With the emergence of the

¹¹¹ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987, p. 136.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 136

modern states penal techniques ceased to harm the body (as we find it practised in the public executions and tortures before the 17th century) and instead would train it, aiming at its optimal and maximally efficient use.¹¹³ The correct use of the body, again, is in the very interest of the entire social body, its persistence, survival and productivity.

This superordinate aim is mainly achieved through two interrelated forms of understanding the body. Firstly, it is possible to witness the emergence of the notion of the body as a machine that produced a series of procedures designated to optimize the body in its capabilities, forces and efficiency that Foucault summarizes as the *anatomo-politics* of the human body. Secondly, there is the emergence of what Foucault calls the *biopolitics* of the population, that is concerned with the understanding of biological processes in order to preserve and prolong life, which is very well mirrored in birth and death rates, level of health and the average expectation of life. The latter is what can be considered the incubator for the production of the knowledge of the body and ultimately the human sciences. It produced a series of regulations, controls and interventions, just as much as norms (often obtained through the human sciences) that were implemented throughout the Classical Age and all directed at the human body in order to maintain its health, preserve its life and ultimately ensure the persistence of the population.

Together they formed a bipolar technology of administering bodies and managing life, and ushered the new “*era of biopower*”¹¹⁴. It is an era that is characterized by the body’s exploitation as an object of knowledge. This development, the turn of power towards life, and the governing of bodies through knowledge has paved the way for the modern societies in a series of aspects. For instance, Capitalism could not have developed if not embedded within the two-fold concern of the body we find in the modern state, that is to say, the disciplining and training of the body within the machinery of production (anatomo-politics), on the one hand, and the maintenance of a healthy and productive population (biopolitics), on the other.

It is a historical moment, as for the first time and also exclusively in the Western societies we find that biological existence would be reflected as a concern in political relations. As Foucault points out: “Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery

¹¹³ Cf. Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Random House, 1995, pp. 149-154.

¹¹⁴ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987, p. 140.

it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of the life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body.”¹¹⁵

It is also this historical moment, that coincides with the rediscovery of tattooing and its comeback to the Western societies. Thus, what we can retain is that the practice of permanently marking oneself on the skin arrived at a conglomerate of societies where political strategies would be thoroughly concerned with the life of their populations and the body of each subject. A concern that would be reflected in measurements and techniques of control and coercion going through the entire social body. But it would not only be reflected in legal measurements. It would also foster a certain body image: a proper body is a healthy one, and moreover, it is inviolate.¹¹⁶ This is very well reflected in the most common middle-class objections against tattooing. They mainly derive from the notion that the body is “inviolable, too pure to be disfigured.”¹¹⁷ Moreover, wearing tattoos violates the notion of appearance of a light and clear skin, so that marked skin is immediately associated with impurity, unhealthiness, and also the lower classes.¹¹⁸ We can see directly how the underlying body politics that are so destined to preserve life and health are thoroughly reflected in those middle-class objections against tattooing.

Against this background, it is also worth mentioning the human sciences one more time since given this context we can consider it a historical necessity that they would occupy themselves with the practice. As I have elaborated already, one can observe a shift in how the scientific inquisitiveness would concern itself with tattooing. Just after the practice’s rediscovery as an exotic practice the object of study is exactly that: tattooing was investigated in its “primitive” context. What was produced was a corpus of descriptive knowledge on how tattooing was exercised, what social and cultural functions it served in the tribes, and what kind of motifs were tattooed. Then, tattooing conquered Western bodies. And, it was not only a few scholars and sailors anymore engaging with the Natives and out of curiosity or fascination bringing back a tattoo as a souvenir of their travels and discoveries. Tattooing was

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

¹¹⁶ Cf. Garcia-Merritt, Gabriel, “Inked Lives: Tattoos, Identity, and Power”, *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. (2014) 13880. <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/13880>, p. 16.

¹¹⁷ Cf. De Mello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 140.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Irwin, Katherine, “Saints and Sinners: Elite Tattoo Collectors and Tattooists as Positive and Negative Deviants”, *Sociological Spectrum*, vol. 23/ nr. 1 (2003), p. 35.

starting to be practised *within* the European societies, so much, that it even developed into a whole new culture of tattooing. Once the practice spread in the Western societies, once it was Western bodies being marked, the scientific examination started to concern itself with it under a whole new perspective: it is exactly this moment, the moment in which tattooing spread from primitive onto Western bodies, when the human sciences directed their interest for the practice towards the issue of life and health. It is this moment when Medicine, Psychiatry and Criminology started to investigate tattooing as an indicator of diseases, mental disorders or criminal tendencies. It is this moment when tattooing is invested with an entirely new semiological meaning and turns into the mark of deviance.

One cannot emphasize enough how striking this is: before when studying tattooing as a primitive practice, there was no concern whatsoever with the body in the discourse surrounding tattooing. Only after entering the European societies the body started to become the focus of the human sciences when dealing with tattooing. This entails two implications. First of all, we see how within the European societies the biopolitics rendered tattooing a deviant behaviour. We have already seen how under the use of disciplinary mechanisms the practice was invested with an extremely negative image, the image of abnormality, and how consequently this produced the coercive effect of people both not getting tattoos and disparage those wearing tattoos. This phenomenon would not have occurred if it would not have been for the deeply engraved concern of European societies with life. It was this cultural and political nexus of power and life that tattooing was confronted with when it made its way back to the “old world”. Only under this precondition tattooing could ever become a matter of health and life, a matter that would be of concern of the human sciences.

Secondly, the fact that scientific discourse only started to consider tattooing a problem related to the body when tattoos started to appear on Western bodies, indicates that not every body is of the same concern. This is especially significant when considering one of the main questions this thesis is concerned with, namely: How could tattooing develop into a popular and endorsed practice in the working class, while it was deeply invested with a high stigma in the middle class?

With regard with the “primitive” bodies when being confronted with tattooing as an exotic practice, it cannot be a surprise that they would be left out of consideration of the human sciences. Of course, the biopolitics of Western societies would be concerned with their own bodies, that is to say, their own populations. The human sciences, having the human

being as the centre of their interest, do not have every human as the centre of their interest. The human sciences, as much as their name might suggest it, do not have a universal humanist approach. They are embedded within the biopolitics, that is to say, they are part of a political strategy. Going back to the very birth hour of the biopolitics, the reversion of the right of death, ever since life has become the major concern of power, one can also be witness of a redefinition of where a threat of life would be directed at. As Foucault points out: “Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone.”¹¹⁹ The existence of everyone, in this context, would not mean every man, but every individual of the population. Wars would be waged on behalf of life but the life of the own population. This is why it was possible that the era of bio-power could also see two world wars and a holocaust.¹²⁰

This explains why the human sciences would not be concerned with tattooing as a problem of life and health as long as it remained on the bodies of the “primitives”. But what about the working-class bodies? The fact that the practice could rapidly spread in the working class, while in the middle class it soon turned into a mark of deviance, suggests that even though under the very same regime of the bio-politics, there must be some sort of difference underlying on some level.

If we take a look into one more of the many shifts that came along with the emergence of the modern state, one that is interrelated as well with the reversion of the right of death, we can find an explanation. With the transition from the feudal to the modern states, and with the shift of power from the sovereign to the social body, we can find as well the appearance of a new class: the bourgeoisie. Through an examination of the history of sexuality in our Western societies, Foucault has come to the conclusion that this very class and its hegemony is crucial to the emergence of the bio-power, and consequently to the new value of the body. He observes what he refers to as the “deployment of sexuality”, entailing sexuality having developed increasingly since the 17th century and being very much linked with the relations of power.¹²¹ He considers the deployment of sexuality the necessary consequence of a shift in the relations of power, that formerly were based on alliance (a system of marriage as a means of transmitting names and possessions), but due to the political and economic transformations

¹¹⁹ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987, p. 137.

¹²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

¹²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 107.

of that time were no longer instrumental. Instead, sexuality would advance to a new technology of power. It is within the context of this deployment of sexuality, where the body gains its new significance and in which the body and sex are not linked under the objective of mere reproduction, but under the objective of “proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly comprehensive way.”¹²² The deployment of sexuality is highly related to the emergence of the biopolitics, that is to say, the exploitation of the body as an object of knowledge with the objective of its subjection.

Consequently, sex turned into a problem of life and health, and ultimately became a concern of the human sciences. This is the reason for the fundamentally increased discourse on sex, that again would produce norms and knowledge concerning the issue and coercing a certain desired behaviour.¹²³ The result was a broad range of techniques being concerned with a “healthy sexuality” that, of course, in turn, would produce the abnormal counterpart, first and foremost, the perversions. A significantly great part of all this newly produced knowledge pays thorough attention to the sexuality of children and adolescents. And, what is striking and crucial at the same time, is where those techniques, the norms, the knowledge are directed at: it is notably not the people’s child, the future workers whose bodies had to be disciplined to be productive. On the contrary, in the very centre of attention of this whole new concern of the body is “the schoolboy, the child surrounded by domestic servants, tutors and governesses, who was in danger of compromising not so much his physical strength as his intellectual capacity, moral fiber, and the obligation to preserve a healthy line of descent for his family and his social class.”¹²⁴

So, the aim of the biopolitics was not actually the production of docile and productive bodies, in order to sustain a productive labour force. This is the domain of the disciplines emanating from the anatomo-politics. Instead, it was aiming at the persistence of a class, one class: the bourgeoisie. It was their bodies that were of concern. The working-class bodies, on the other hand, were not, and this is how they escaped - at least for a certain amount of time - the exploitation of the body as an object of knowledge, and the corresponding norms and their coercive effects.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹²³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 118.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

I argue, that this is the very reason why tattooing could spread in the working-class: the entire corpus of the knowledge of the body that I have described above explains how the practice could turn into the mark of deviance and abnormality. And, at a second glance, it also explains how in the working-class it still could be endorsed and spread, as the entire regime of the biopolitics simply was not directed at it, and the corresponding knowledge of the body, that kept the middle class from engaging with the practice was not available to them. As Foucault emphasizes: “[...] it took [...] a long time [...] to acknowledge that other classes had a body [...].”¹²⁵ The working-class body started to be a concern of politics only after a series of circumstances such as the outbreaks of epidemics like cholera due to the confined living conditions, and the economic necessity of a stable and capable labour force. Only then, the working-class body started to be of concern, only then it was granted an existence. The consequence was the necessity to control the working-class and keep it under surveillance, which resulted in a series of measurements, such as schooling, housing policies, public hygiene and health, etc.

It is within exactly these measurements, where we can locate the very few legal regulations concerning tattooing. As pointed out several times, in the Western states tattooing never came to a legal ban. The first legal attention ever directed towards the practice was after the outbreaks of hepatitis due to the poor hygienic standards one would usually find in the tattoo parlours. The bodies of the upper classes, the bodies that mattered so to speak, were sufficiently protected through the coercive effect of the norm and the knowledge of the body as they had access to it. In the working-class the practice was endorsed and spread rapidly, as first of all, they did not have the access to the knowledge of the body as it was not directed to them, so they were not subtly coerced to not exercise tattooing, and secondly, legally there were no measurements to restrain the spread of tattoos on working-class bodies, as those bodies were not of the same concern. Only when tattooing started to be perceived as a health hazard also endangering the capability and persistence of the labour force, there was an incitement to regulate the exercise of the practice legally and ensure certain hygiene standards.

What is striking though, is that the most significant improvement of sanitation and hygiene in the tattoo parlours was not a result of the legal regulations implemented after the outbreaks of hepatitis. The most notable increase of hygiene was established through tattooist

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

Lyle Tuttle, that means, it came from within the tattoo community, not a legal authority. But the reason for this introduction of way higher sanitary standards was not incited by necessity from within the community: Lyle Tuttle had simply noticed that the reason why tattooing had such a bad reputation outside of the working-class and his usual clientele, was the bad sanitation and the implied risk of contamination and disease.¹²⁶ Thus, what we can observe is that the most profound improvement in the sanitation of tattooing and the one that has set standards until today, was not caused by a preoccupation with the control of the health hazard for the one main group mainly exercising tattooing, that is to say with working-class bodies. The most groundbreaking techniques in terms of sterilization were incited by the prospect of attracting another clientele, that would have never engaged with the practice otherwise, as their bodies were controlled under the regime of the bio-power. We can therefore clearly conclude that people relate to their bodies differently according to their class affiliation.

DeMello comes to a similar conclusion in her analysis of tattooing in *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of Tattooing*, even though not based on an analysis of the underlying relations of power as in this thesis, but arguing that tattooing represents a form of body praxis as described by Scheper-Hughes. She states: “[...] tattoos, too, are a form of body praxis, and [...] men and women, gays and straights, and working-class and middle-class people will all approach tattoos differently, based on their own social positions. [...] It is clear to me that for many in the middle class, choosing to mark one’s body is a much more complicated matter than it once was (and still is) for many in the working class.”¹²⁷

3.2 Resistant Bodies: Tattooing as a Site of Subversion

3.2.1 Resistance as Reaction

We have seen now that if we aim to understand the development of tattooing since its comeback to the Western societies even its most puzzling aspects are explicable if taking into account the underlying relations of power and examining tattooing under the notion of the inscription of bodies: the inscription of a certain historical context on an individual’s body, the relation between power and subjectivity.

¹²⁶ Cf. De Mello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 78.

¹²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 140.

Yet, so far it might appear as if under this notion the subject is considered as exclusively passive, a mere object of inscription, a disciplined and ultimately obedient subject to power. The way tattooing has developed, its initial appeal to the bourgeoisie that soon abandoned it and later appropriated it from the working-class, just as the continuous struggle within the tattoo community about the prerogative of interpretation do not simply prove the impact and constant operation of power relations. But it also demonstrates very well the effect of an element that is constitutive for power as Foucault conceptualizes it, and that is resistance. As I have mentioned, one of the main conceptual features of Foucault's notion of power is the premise that it is relational and exercised only *between free* subjects. Thinking power as a relation and the parties of this relation as free implies that on both sides is (at least a certain degree of) freedom and the possibility of action. Thus, if we assume a relation of power between free subjects, power is contested: by the actions and reactions of the subjects. This means that "[...] in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all."¹²⁸. The presupposed freedom of the subjects inherently entails the subject's possibility to not obey, that is, to resist, to act and react on its own behalf. This is why power relations are highly unstable, reversible and always in flux: due to the constant and intertwined struggle between power and resistance, between the actions and reactions of free subjects.

It is certainly true that in the ever-changing relations of power there is also the possibility of a power equilibrium to be asymmetrical over a long amount of time, but even in that case, those who are dominated must have the slightest chance of action and resistance. The impossibility of resistance would signify a state of domination: a state where the exercise of freedom is not possible or only unilaterally, where the relations of power are permanently blocked and thus, do not allow resistance.¹²⁹

Taking a look into our contemporary Western societies, and also considering what we have learned from the examination of the development of the relations of power since the Classical Age and how they are reflected in the practice of tattooing, we cannot determine a domination imposed by the middle class, because that would entail that the obedience to its

¹²⁸ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. On the Genealogy of Ethics. An Overview of Work in Progress*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 292.

¹²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 283.

rules, norms and standards is without alternative and that there is no or only little possibility of escaping or resisting them. But this is not the case. As I have shown, there has been resistance against the middle class and its norms, also in the case of tattooing. Therefore, we have to assume free subjects capable of action and resistance. And this is what we have witnessed in the development of tattooing in the West, as I have shown in chapter 2: Bikers, outcasts, prisoners, punks practicing tattooing with the purpose of resistance, resistance to the norms and values of society.

I argue that this phenomenon of using tattooing as a means of resistance is quite an exceptional phenomenon that must have been provoked by the form of power that is specific to our modern Western societies: disciplinary power and its coercive technology of the body. As I have argued, power relations are reversible and always contested but what can happen is that certain relations of power, even though in flux, tend to be more or less asymmetrically stabilized in time. As we have seen, with the emergence of the modern state there was also the correlated development of a new class, namely the bourgeoisie. The Classical Age is characterized by a series of profound political, economic, social and cultural transformations, that can be considered the origin of a number of structures and institutions as we know them today. One of those remaining structures is the cultural hegemony of the middle class. We cannot assume a state of domination as conceptualized by Foucault because there are evidently observable actions of resistance but nevertheless, we have to assume the middle class in a hegemonic position in the relations of power in our modern Western societies. We have already seen its manifestation in the effect that Barbara Ehrenreich has described in her analysis of the standardization of middle-class norms in *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*. She observes how the domination of the middle class is, inter alia, perceivable in the media. She observes that media representatives (whether in the academic field or journalism), tend so much to deal with their own values and norms as if they were universal, that the effect is that the middle class representing just a fragment of society, appears as universal. Consequently, this has determined our societies' definition of what is *normal*. It is only the middle class that is visible, and thus it is exclusively middle-class norms that are represented. Reinforcing the effect of the norm, there is the Human Sciences, that represent the perfect instrument to cement the notion of what is to be considered natural and therefore normal in a scientific disguise. Due to the cultural hegemony of the middle class it is middle-class members who are occupying the most influential positions in society, that is to

say, positions that enable one to policy-making action and shaping (public) opinion: the middle class, and therefore its norms and values, is overrepresented not only in important political offices, in the parliament, etc. but also in education, academia and in the media. Thus, the middle class occupies those positions in society where knowledge and corresponding norms are produced. The consequent effect is that the middle class *is* the norm. It is against the middle class that we (as the whole society) are measured and measuring others.

At this point, it is worth to come back one more time to the political strategy of normalization that has emerged in correlation with the modern state. I have elaborated already why and how the norm as a coercive instrument is so successful. I want to come back to this matter nevertheless, as it is essential in order to understand how deeply it is engraved in society and how in addition it perpetuates the cultural hegemony of the middle class. The norm is central to the entire form of political power that has emerged with the modern state. It carries such a coercive potential that until a certain degree, it makes law unnecessary. Here lies a crucial point. We are very prone to perceive power as law and accordingly we locate coercion exactly there. But this notion of power and how it works on us fails entirely to recognize the way more subtle, but therefore more coercive effect of the norm. The fact, that we do not suspect the operation of power outside of the juridical apparatus is deceiving. And, this is exactly why the norm is so capable of subjection. As Foucault states: “[...] power is only tolerable on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.”¹³⁰ Herein we find the very reason for normalization being such an effective instrument. It is not obvious. Unlike legal measurements, the norm operates without being noticed. It even lies within the word: it seems *normal*, and what seems normal is hardly ever questioned. Moreover, as we can remember, the norm also operates with a double reference to an assumed order, an artificial one, and a natural one. The latter implies that non-compliance with a norm does not only signify deviance from law, but from nature. Consequently, the abnormal equals the unnatural and in reverse, the normal signifies accordance with nature. And it is the non-compliance with middle-class norms that implies deviance and consequently exclusion.

¹³⁰ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987, p. 86.

We have seen already how the knowledge of the body that has developed as a political strategy since the Classical Age, is directed at middle-class bodies. This is why for a certain amount of time tattooing could spread in the working-class: because the norms and the knowledge that prevented the middle class from engaging with the practice simply did not have the same coercive effect on them as their bodies were not the actual target of this political technology. But, due to the domination of the middle class, sooner or later, there had to be a notable effect on the working-class as well, even though it was not the primary concern. After tattooing had been rediscovered it was simply embraced by the working-class as a practice of commemoration of loved ones, travels or as a token of bravery and patriotism, as we find it a lot in the military, especially during the two world wars.¹³¹

Only after the tattoo had developed into the mark of deviance in the middle class, tattooing gained this new meaning. Before it was simply practised as a form of celebration of courage, adventure and pride, often associated with the military. But when confronted with the new semiological meaning tattooing had been invested in the middle class, the practice acquired this new aspect of representing deviant behaviour. Only after the middle class had declared it deviant, it was practised as deviance. Or in other words: only after the norm had been established it could be violated.

The first effect of the redefinition of tattooing as a mark of deviance was a rather profound one for the working-class. We remember it was fairly popular for recruits in both the world wars to get tattooed before being deployed. This even provoked a certain level of acceptance as the tattoo mostly indicated that a tattoo wearer had been serving his country. But only a few years after the end of World War II, this trend rapidly began to fade. Before the tattooed veterans received considerable respect. Now, despite the indication of their service, they were confronted with heavy prejudices, that caused them serious difficulties, so much that many of them started to regret their tattoos.¹³² We can see how, although within the working-class the tattooing had no negative association and instead was rather prominent, due to the domination of the middle class and its norms the practice started to entail repercussions for those who were tattooed.

¹³¹ Cf. De Mello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 63.

¹³² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 66.

This is, historically, the moment when people began to practice tattooing with a whole new purpose: a clear rejection of middle-class norms and thus resistance against its domination. It is only against this background, the domination of the middle class and its reinterpretation of the practice that tattooing could ever develop a subversive character. When tattooing was practised despite the stigma and the social exclusion it entailed, when it was practised although being aware of the consequences as a symbolic refusal of the dominating culture, the tattoo gains the semiological meaning of resistance. It is the reaction of free subjects contesting the dominating party in the relations of power. We can even claim that tattooing as a form of resistance has been fostered by the domination of the middle class.

3.2.2 Developing Agency

We have established so far that the development of resistance can be considered almost a historical necessity as Foucault's notion of power presupposes that were there is power, there must be resistance. In addition, we have seen how in the case of tattooing the domination of the middle class and the correlated political strategy of normalization that had rendered the practice deviant caused tattooing to develop the purpose of undermining the dominant culture.

In order to understand what it means to develop agency over one's body within this context, it is worth to illuminate one more time the most striking and determining characteristics of this dominant culture: As we have seen in chapter 3.1, since the Classical Age there can be witnessed the emergence of a political technology in the Western societies that is entirely concerned with and directed at the body, and that has profoundly shaped our culture, so much that we hardly recognize it as a cultural particularity and rather believe it to be natural order. This technology is based on a two-fold notion of the body. On one hand, we find the new necessity of the preservation of life (thus of the population) as a political objective that grants the body a considerably higher value as we find it elsewhere or at other times. The result of the body being invested with this new significance and the accompanying importance of health and physical integrity has produced not only legal measurements concerned with public health, hygiene, etc. but also a very specific knowledge of the body, both manifested within the emergence and relevance of the human sciences, as well as within a set of norms. On the other hand, there is the notion of the body as a manipulable apparatus, that with the application of adequate instruments can be trained to optimal productiveness

and efficiency. This is where the entire set of disciplines is implemented, as a new form of exercising power. The result is the permanent examination and differentiation of the subjects as the key element of their control. What is crucial in both cases is a coercive effect on the body. In the former, the subject is coerced through norms and knowledge to a certain behaviour that benefits its health and maintains its body unharmed and consequently serves the superordinate aim of the life and health of the whole social body. In the latter, it is subjected to inhabit and use its body in the most efficient way, which contributes to the productivity and sustainability of the population.

The result of both is a society, that is so much centred around the body, that in each and every subject's relation towards its body there is a political dimension. This relation can be either of obedient or resistant kind. But either way: only within a society, where the body is invested with such a significance and where an entire political technology is directed at it, the body could ever become a site of subversion and resistance. Only where there is the entire corpus of a knowledge and a whole set of norms implemented in order to coerce subjects to a behaviour that benefits their health and their physical capability, in a society where the physical integrity of the body has advanced to a major political concern, tattooing, the permanent marking of the body, could ever be invested with the semiological meaning of deviance and even resistance. Because if the dominant culture requires absolute physical integrity, a practice that has spread from primitive bodies to working-class bodies and was soon associated with drunks, outcasts and health hazards, it can be considered an act of resistance to knowingly mark oneself with this specific mark of deviance. This is the moment when the tattoo gains another semiological meaning, namely the one of resistance.

We can find this phenomenon of tattooing operating as a means of reclaiming one's body throughout the history of tattooing in the West since its rediscovery not only once. Where there is a strongly asymmetrical relation of power and where this domination is in any way related to the body and objectifying it, one can find examples of tattooing being exercised with exactly this purpose of undermining the domination, overcoming the alienation, and overwriting external social inscriptions. There are many examples of individuals or entire groups experiencing suppression and alienation and then discovering tattooing for the purpose of (at least symbolically) overcoming it.

Let us against this background examine one form of tattooing that carries until today the probably highest stigma and serves as maybe the most extreme, and therefore very

illustrative example of this confrontation that can be considered to have a quality of resistance, that is prison tattooing. Prison tattooing occupies quite an outstanding position in two ways at the same time. Together these two aspects draw quite a comprehending picture of prison tattooing as the noteworthy kind of transgression, that it is: First of all, it represents the most stigmatized form of the practice in Western societies, and even within the “tattoo community” it is marginalized. While wearing a tattoo can imply to meet prejudices or even disadvantages for anybody, the convict acquiring a tattoo during his imprisonment on top of that deliberately marks himself as such, as a convict. The repercussions are usually not little. It diminishes perspectives of finding a job, an apartment and general acceptance in society after the release. Even fellow tattooists are reluctant to employ ex-convicts that practised tattooing during their incarceration, who often hope to find both a job and acknowledgement in the community.¹³³ Secondly, the body of the convict itself can be considered the most extreme representation of the body politics that are at work in our Western societies. One could say, it is the most complete object of constant surveillance, examination and individualized knowledge that we can possibly find in our society and represents absolute subjection and the total loss of control over one’s body.

As a result of these two aspects, the tattooed body of the convict is suppressed and alienated in a double sense. First, through the anticipation of the external reception of his tattooed body as the concretization of his identity as a convicted criminal and second, in the mere confrontation with the prison as an apparatus of a perfected surveillance, isolation and complete dependence. Taking into consideration this double suppression, that is most extremely involved in prison tattooing, but undoubtedly operating generally in regard to tattooing in contemporary Western societies (at least before the practice was appropriated by the middle class), we can see how tattooing can when confronting domination function as an instrument to regain control and reclaim one’s body. How so? We have seen how the body is subjected to power and its coercive mechanisms that render the individual a passive subject constituted by external, disciplining structures. But in the deliberate wearing of a sign that has been declared deviant, the individual takes action, it exercises its freedom, it challenges power and resists it. In this action of the subjection there is a moment of reinterpretation of that sign, the sign of action and resistance: it writes over the imposed inscription and thus, renders it invalid. The tattoo is no longer the sign of the socially branded but the sign of a free

¹³³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

subject capable of action. As Perry Farrell, ex-punk, lead singer of Porno for Pyros and wearer of tattoos puts it: “signs of defiance [that] symbolize both... enstrangement from mainstream society and a triumph over dominant values and lifestyles that I find oppressive.”

¹³⁴ Subverting the norm that is imposed on oneself and one’s body is an act of resistance and of reclaiming control over one’s body. The convict, as the most extreme example of powerlessness and a total loss of control over oneself, tattooing can be understood as the last resort of overcoming (at least symbolically) this situation, of constituting him or herself as a free subject despite of being incarcerated.

I would like to elaborate on one concrete example of penal tattooing, in which interestingly enough tattooing had been used as a means to objectify and brand prisoners before they appropriated reinterpreted the practice. It was common in Russia to brand convicts indicating their crime and / or sentence until it came to a ban of this practice in 1863. For instance, deserters would be marked with a cross on their hand and thieves were tattooed on their forehead or cheeks with the letter BOP (Russian for thief). One would also find brandings on shoulder blades or forearms indicating the criminal’s sentence such as "CK" for Ssylno-Katorzhny (hard labour convict), "SP" for Ssylno-Poselenets (hard labour deportee) and "Б" for Begly (escapee).¹³⁵ Those branded would rewrite the penal authorities’ inscriptions on their bodies and reinterpret the practice of tattooing that was used to brand and degrade them as a tool of reclaiming the control over their body.¹³⁶ What has emerged from that is an entire culture of tattooing that flourished especially in the 1930s with the development of castes in the Russian penal facilities. The tattoos served to mark an inmate’s rank within in the prison and particularly against the background of an enormous increase of the prison population under the Soviet regime this practice gained in importance. The mass incarceration caused a notable heterogenization of those imprisoned. Thieves, hooligans, and political prisoners would serve their time alongside each other in the Gulags. Within this context, tattoos would soon help to differentiate among “legitimate thieves” and those who were incarcerated for political reasons, and moreover establish not only artistically refined imagery, but also an entire code that would inform both about an inmate’s prestige and about his criminal record and sentence. “The overall accumulation of tattoos, as the progressively

¹³⁴ Farrell, Perry in Sullivan, Nikki, “The Somatechnics of Bodily Inscription: Tattooing”, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 10 (2009), p. 130.

¹³⁵ Cf. Sidorov, Danzig Baldaev, *Russian criminal tattoo encyclopedia. Volume III*. London: Fuel, 2008, p. 21.

¹³⁶ Cf. Schildkrout, Enid, “Inscribing the Body” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 33 (2004), p. 324.

richer and more elaborate design of each, raise one's prestige. The lowest caste is considered unworthy of tattoos, so they would be forbidden from getting any, or forced to remove the ones they've got. And vice versa, the elite caste would use their tattoos to convey their high status and instill fear."¹³⁷

The tattoos that were made in the Russian prisons advanced enormously in both technical quality as well as in the variety of the imagery and it ultimately attracted attention from the authorities. In the 1960s Sergei Vasiliev, interested in photography and working for the police in Siberian Chelyabinsk, volunteered to document the tattoos the inmates of the prisons were wearing, trying as well to decode the imagery. The tattoo culture that has developed in the Russian penal apparatus turned out to be so rich that it resulted in a multitude of photographs in Vasiliev's archive. Those photographs would later feature in the three-volume encyclopedia *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia* published by Fuel also providing an archive of drawings of tattoos observed in the prisons by the guard Danzig Baldaev. The prison tattooing started to vanish as it became too wide spread among the prison population. But the imagery, well documented and preserved thanks to Baldaev and Vasiliev made its way into the mainstream tattoo consumption and developed into a popular style. Under the hashtag #russiancriminaltattoo one can currently find around 16.700 showing and Murray & Sorrell Fuel Ltd is not only selling the *Russian Criminal Tattoo Encyclopedia*, but also playing cards with Baldaev's drawings just as posters of his drawings and Vasiliev's photographs of the inmates, a phenomenon I would like to come back to in the next chapter.

Another objectified body for which tattooing has provided an instrument of reclamation and subversion is the female body. The female body is so much embedded within a network of suppressive norms, political and economic interests and rigid aesthetic requirements, that an entire fields of studies have emerged from that problem. As the objectification of the female body is so manifold and extensive that is just too broad for this thesis I will not elaborately profoundly on the matter. But I do want to examine at least how and where we can locate the female body in the whole matter of tattooing.

First of all, it is worth taking one more look into Foucault's analysis of the emergence of the biopolitics and the deployment of sexuality as it is conclusive about the female body and how it is invested politically in general in our Western societies since the Classical Age.

¹³⁷ Vasiliev, Sergei, Interview I with Goumen, Julia and Murray, Damon, *Russian Criminal Tattoo Archive*, <http://fuel-design.com/russian-criminal-tattoo-archive/films/>.

Foucault observes four strategies concerning sexuality that have emerged since the early 18th century and produced related knowledge and coercive mechanisms. As one of those strategies he considers the hysterization of female bodies, which he understands as “a threefold process whereby the feminine body was analyzed - qualified and disqualified - as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality; whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices [...]; whereby, finally, it was placed in the organic communication with the social body [...], the family space [...], and the life of children [...].”¹³⁸ It is this hysterization of women and their bodies that has fostered notions of womanhood and femininity that are operating and being contested in our Western societies until today. It is those three aspects that cemented the sexualization and objectification of female bodies, the idea of its thorough biological distinctiveness determined by its reproductive capability.

Although this can be considered an important insight, and moreover has served as a significant starting point for feminist thinking and theorizing one has to acknowledge that Foucault’s general conceptualization of disciplinary power fails to take into account the particularity of the female body in our societies. As he does not specify what kind of body is the target of the disciplines he describes one has to assume, that for him any body, irrespective of its gender, is exposed to the same coercive instruments. This gender neutrality is problematic because it misses to concede that the reality of our societies is certainly not a gender-neutral one.¹³⁹

One has to understand gender as a *technique* as well in order to fully grasp how the female body is situated and moreover, disciplined. Unquestionably our society is not a gender-neutral one and in the case of women, their gender does not only manifest itself in political, economic or social discrimination but in their very identity and the way they relate to their body. More, or at least in a different way than men. Angela King has worked out in a distinctively conclusive essay on this matter how Foucault’s analysis of power may fail to recognize the exceptional situation of the female body but that if adapted under the presumption of gender inequality it can still be illuminating about how power targets the female body and how it is ultimately disciplined. As King puts it: “[...] gender needs to be

¹³⁸ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1987, p. 104.

¹³⁹ Cf. King, Angela, “The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body”, *Journal of International Women’s studies*, vol. 5 (2004), p. 33.

acknowledged as a technology of the body in its own right.”¹⁴⁰ This distinctive technology of the female body is firmly rooted in the assumption of an essential biological difference between the sexes and that is embedded within the multitude of dualistic paradigms of Western thought, as Foucault has described it as well in his conceptualization of the hysterization of the female body. This differentiation has produced a norm and that norm is male. It presupposes man as the essential human subject that results in women to be the “other”. The presumed difference and the accompanying effect of women being measured and judged against a male norm has rendered the woman biologically and culturally inferior and reduced to her reproductive capacity. Additionally, the female is invested with the notion of representing some sort of mystery or enigma, which ultimately has caused the female body to be exposed to a far more thorough and intensive examination than the male. The result is the production of a series of pathologies and deficiencies that would be diagnosed in the case of any *abnormality*, and an effect that coerces women to a certain behaviour, but also appearance that is considered *feminine*.¹⁴¹ This whole development of the technology of the female body emerged with the Classical Age and coincides with a significant decrease of male adornment and an increasing tendency of female fashion to emphasize the physiological “otherness” of the woman, as with highlighting breasts, waist, etc.¹⁴² Ever since an incredibly broad range of requirements regarding the female body has emerged. They might have changed over time, but the disciplining mechanisms of controlling and shaping the female body remain in operation as today mainly in practices of diet and shape, skincare, hair removal, and even surgery.¹⁴³ The consequence is that women find themselves in a reality where not only their existence but also their value is profoundly defined through their body and appearance, and undisputable way more than men.

Nowadays, it is rather apparent that also men suffer from this impositions, as reflected for instance, in the debate about “toxic masculinity”. In general, one can witness far more awareness about how much gender is incorporated in the way we constitute ourselves and how we relate to our bodies. Therefore, an analysis of gender-specific analysis of the technologies of the body would offer a more conclusive insight.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 35.

The technology of the female body is amply reflected in tattooing as well. Ever since its rediscovery women played a distinct role that changed over the years but nevertheless demonstrates the special position of the female body in society. As I have mentioned in chapter 2, it was fairly common for a while to exhibit tattooed people in travelling shows, carnivals and freak shows. And it was not only tattooed Natives from exotic tribes but even Westerners started to be displayed for the mere fact of wearing tattoos. While it was quite a successful business for a certain amount of time, after a couple of years people started to lose interest. What suddenly revived the business though, was the engagement of women in the 1880s. Tattooed women did not only animate the business, they rapidly overshadowed the tattooed men in the shows. The display of tattooed female bodies was successful for several reasons: First of all, we have to consider the historical context, which would be the Victorian period. As women displaying their tattoos involved at least partial nudity, it resulted in them showing way more skin than it was usual for that time. Thus, they attracted a large audience not only for their tattoos but also and probably foremost for their sexualized bodies. Interestingly enough, it was also – and still is – this sexualized version of women that is tattooed in the bodies of men, which until today does not happen the other way around.

Secondly, since womanhood was thoroughly associated with refined, cultured behaviour, chastity, docility and modesty, tattoos on a female body created an appealing contrast, especially because people in the West had seen tattoos only on men until then. To emphasize the contrast between tattooed female bodies and the Western concept of femininity the women would often tell scandalous stories about how they got their tattoos that would mostly use the narrative of having been forced to get tattooed, usually by Natives and in association with sexual assaults. This is considerably interesting, as it reveals how even when tattooed, the female body was invested with the notion of chastity and vulnerability while at the same time being sexualized. In contrast to both the savage and the masculine practice of tattooing, the tattooed female body provided a new profitable attraction for the sideshows.¹⁴⁴

Another aspect of the history of the female body in tattooing that is worth mentioning is a few decades later: the freak shows had disappeared, the practice had considerably spread in the working-class and women had basically entirely vanished from the scene. Even more, they were thoroughly and intendedly kept away. It was not uncommon for tattoo parlours to

¹⁴⁴ Cf. De Mello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 58.

even establish policies to not tattoo women, with (sometimes) the exception of lesbians. They were considered tattooable as they usually did not provoke the appearance of an enraged husband, and moreover, because they already were considered deviant from any kind of established notion of femininity, or (sexual) normality.

Tattooist Samuel Stewards writes on the issue:

“When I finally discovered the trouble that always surrounded the tattooing of women, I established a policy of refusing to tattoo a woman unless she were twenty-one, married and accompanied by her husband, with documentary proof to show their marriage. The only exception to this was lesbians, and they had to be over twenty-one and prove it. [...] Nice girls don’t get tattoos. [...] [The only female customers were; note of the author] large lank-haired skags, with ruined landscapes of faces and sagging hose and run-over heels.”¹⁴⁵

This account on the whole matter of women and tattooing in the “golden age of tattooing” is revealing in many aspects: We can see, first of all, how the female body occupies an entirely separated position in tattooing and the related norms. Even in the “deviant” practice of tattooing, the female body was invested with a series of coercive and misogynist notions of femininity. Stewards implied definition of “nice girls”, namely the opposite of “large, lank-haired skags, with ruined landscapes of faces” demonstrates to what kind of appearance the female body was disciplined, but also how any kind of deviation from that would entail to be judged and associated with another group that was considered deviant: sexual abnormal, the homosexuals. Secondly, it makes obvious how much the control over a woman’s body did not rest with her but with her husband, boyfriend or any other kind of male keeper. For a woman it would not only be required to have the legal age in order to autonomously decide over her body, she would have to be married and after all, it would be her husband autonomously deciding over her body.

Both aspects are striking as they reveal that in a social realm that was not affected by same the disciplining norms produced by the biopolitics as the middle class and invested with the same value, where tattooing could spread even though it was highly stigmatized, there was yet another coercive mechanism at work, namely the one concerning the female body, producing its objectification and subjection.

¹⁴⁵ Stewards, S. in: *ibid.*, p. 61.

Against this background we can understand how tattooing for women could become an instrument of both reclaiming control over one's own body and subverting the imposed norms regarding the female appearance, or as Christine Braunberger puts it "a proscribed physicality"¹⁴⁶. The female body is supposed to undergo a series of body modifications in order to comply a certain image of femininity and yet, there is one body modification that entirely undermines those aesthetic norms and this is tattooing. Therefore the practice carries such a subversive potential for women, as their bodies are even more objectified and disciplined by a technology of the body of its own.

The following example demonstrates very well how a symbol of denunciation and oppression was reappropriated and reinterpreted in the act of subversion and fighting alienation. It takes us to the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. It is known that inmates were classified according to why they were considered "enemies" to the German Reich and race and in consonance with their classification they were forced to wear certain symbols sewed on their inmate clothing. As Jews were forced to wear the yellow star of David, detained homosexual men in the camps were labelled with a pink triangle. Thus, the symbol was deeply inscribed with the meaning and associated with a tremendous and calamitous hatred. In the course of the American gay rights movement though, that very symbol started to be worn with pride and a whole new self-awareness. The symbol had been reappropriated by the very group it had stigmatized.¹⁴⁷ And even more, it spread on people's skins. Until today the pink triangle remains a popular motif to tattoo in the LGBTQ-community. I want to emphasize several aspects of this phenomenon: First of all, we can see a prominent example of what literature commonly refers to as *reverse appropriation*, as a "method of political subversion where an alienated group can unite against an oppressive dominant culture."¹⁴⁸

Secondly, I would like to direct some attention away from the mere symbol and towards the use of the practice itself as I believe it rather striking. A not only culturally, but also politically tremendously oppressed group deprived of basic rights on account of their sexual orientation uses a stigmatized practice and marks their skin with a symbol of that very stigma. I have elaborated already on how tattooing can serve the purpose of reclaiming

¹⁴⁶ Braunberger, Christine in: Sullivan, Nikki, "The Somatechnics of Bodily Inscription: Tattooing", *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 10 (2009), p. 130.

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Camacho, Jocelyn, "The Tattoo: A Mark of Subversion, Deviance, or Mainstream Self-Expression?", *Graduate Theses and Graduate Dissertations*, <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/4994>, (2014), p. 12.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

control over one's body when facing a domination and especially where this domination is concerning the body. Obviously, the stigma of homosexuality is also a very corporal one, but it goes beyond that. What the gay community claimed when reappropriating the symbol and even wearing it irremovably on their skin was not only the liberation of their bodies but their very right to be visible, to actually exist.

For now, I think, it starts to be clear that the tattoo can serve and has served throughout the history with the possibility of overwriting socially imposed inscriptions, escape the disciplining mechanisms and thus turn the tattoo into a sign of both agency and rebellion. In our Western societies it is within the socio-historical context of a political technology of the body that is destined to both preserve and discipline it, where the body is invested with a certain value but therefore as well subjected to a constant surveillance, control, examination and evaluation, where the body could turn into a site of subversion. The mere fact, that it has to be reclaimed, that the subject has to develop agency over it, demonstrates how much the body is contested between power and subjectivity.

3.2.3 The Absorption of Resistance

Now, how can we explain that tattooing evolved from a working-class practice, avoided and condemned by the middle class, embraced as a means of expressing subversion and rejection of mainstream norms and lifestyle by those rebelling against their alienation and a state of domination, to a trend that in the course of a few years could cross the social borders into the middle class? And not only that. As we have seen in chapter 2.2.3 *The Reinvention of Tattooing in the middle class*, the practice advanced so far into the middle class that an entirely new form of the practice, moreover, a whole new and trend-setting elite emerged from it.

This is the phenomenon literature often refers to as the tattoo renaissance. As already pointed out before, I consider this term misleading and not depicting well what this process actually is for two main reasons: First of all, tattooing was not “reborn”, it was if anything rediscovered since it has always been practiced among many cultures around the globe. It was just out of Western sight, and later when it was already practiced in the working class, condemned and rendered deviant.

Secondly, when tattooing finally started to appeal to a middle-class audience it was not just adopted from the working-class. As we have seen, the practice had to undergo a

thorough transformation in order to comply with middle-class norms and moreover, it established a new oppressive class system within the tattoo community that again, rendered certain forms of the practice deviant. I want to elaborate more on this phenomenon because I consider it striking and revealing at the same time, and I believe it gives profound clues about how a social practice like tattooing is embedded within a system of certain power relations that cause a perpetual contest about its presupposed meaning and culture.

For instance, in the mere fact of understanding this whole process as a renaissance, we see demonstrated what is central to it: the cultural domination of the middle class. Because what is implied is that even though tattooing had been practised first of all, globally (but among tribes that have been considered primitive), and secondly, later within the working-class (the form of the practice that was invested with the semiological meaning of deviance) it is now, with the adoption of the practice in the middle class that tattooing not only gains a whole new meaning but even more a whole new visibility. This visibility though is not one that represents all forms of tattooing. It only represents the middle-class form, that is to say, the one that complies with its norms. The one that reorients tattooing towards a new assumed meaning, and thus creates a social distance towards the form of tattooing as it was practised in the working-class.

I claim that this development, the appropriation of tattooing by the middle class is far from being a matter of chance. I rather consider it a highly probable necessity in the everlasting and complex interplay of power and resistance. In order to fully comprehend the appropriation of tattooing by the middle class against this background, I would like to refer to the concept of *carnivalization* as Lauren Langman has described it with recourse to Mikhail Bakhtin. Langman defines carnivalization as “[...] the process by which various expressions of transgression and an aesthetic of the grotesque are provided as commodities that keep in check the anger and discontent of a commodified, capitalist political economy in its global moment.”¹⁴⁹ Among those transgressive expressions in which one can find the manifestation of a carnivalization he mentions extreme body modifications like tattoos, piercings as well as punk and porn chic in fashion.¹⁵⁰ As the name suggests the concept derives from the historic example of the Carnival in the Renaissance that represents a transgressive practice that

¹⁴⁹ Langman, Lauren, “Punk, Porn and Resistance: Carnivalization and the Body in Popular Culture”, *Current Sociology*, vol. 56/ nr. 4 (2008), p. 663.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 657.

involves the body and that has been incorporated by the dominant culture and thus stripped off of its subversive potential. The example of the Carnival is moreover especially interesting to this thesis as it involves, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, a confrontation of two forms of the body as a representation of a cultural identity, namely the grotesque and the renaissance body. The former can be understood as the use and representation of the popular body in the Carnivals, since one of their central characteristics is that it is a festival of the lower classes that in the course of the festivities would engage in transgressive actions such as defecating, explicit sexual actions, vomiting, bleeding etc., but also fun, joy and laughter, that altogether would represent the celebration of the body and its functions. This very explicit and boundless form of body praxis carried a certain rebellious moment and implied cultural resistance to the dominant culture represented by the aristocracy and their renaissance body that was quite the opposite, namely a highly contained body whose functions would be hidden from view.¹⁵¹ Thus, it is important to understand the Carnival not simply as an opportunity for a release for the masses, but as a “critique of social hierarchies, domination and a place and time of resistance. Through mockery and satire, it challenged the elite authority of church and state by ignoring typical patterns of deference and demeanor to elites.”¹⁵² Therefore, when talking about the Carnival we should not consider it as a mere confrontation of two forms of bodily representation and the related cultural identity, but acknowledge it as an intentional and deliberate display of a certain body representation (the grotesque) in order to oppose and undermine the form of the dominant culture and class (the classical body).

The similarity of this confrontation with the momentum of resistance in tattooing is quite evident. But in taking a more profound look into the subversive potential of the Carnival one will discover an even more revealing observation. As Langman points out:

“Carnival can be thought of as a festival opposed to the normal and typical nature of everyday life; here the transgressive is valorized and a grotesque esthetic becomes normative - as critique. The transgressive that is typically relegated to the margins to keep society from being polluted becomes acceptable. [...] But finally, however pleasurable its experiences, it ultimately served hegemonic

¹⁵¹ Cf. DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 134.

¹⁵² Langman, Lauren, “Punk, Porn and Resistance: Carnivalization and the Body in Popular Culture”, *Current Sociology*, vol. 56/ nr. 4 (2008), p. 661.

functions: to contain discontent and malaise, to channel it away from the political and into the cultural where it could be neutralized.”¹⁵³

What does this mean? It means that with the confrontation and subversion of (bodily) norms the Carnival was a form of cultural resistance. But this resistance and form of critique meets another element, namely acceptance. This is quite striking: the open transgression was in a way a tolerated moment of resistance that ultimately was actually benefiting the hegemony of the dominant class because it was under control and limited in time. The transgression by being momentarily accepted served a double function: as a temporary opportunity for the lower classes to openly challenge the authority, and at the same time, it had a constraining effect that would prevent a long-term and more profound resistance. From this very potential of the Carnival Langman develops his concept of carnivalization as a process that through the element of consumption inhibits or even neutralizes the subversive potential of countercultures. It is worth to take a profound look into this matter as it will be very illuminating about the appropriation of tattooing by the middle class. First of all, the concept is founded on the assumption of the body as a locus of both social control and personal agency, just as I have elaborated so far in this thesis. Against this background, Langman also concludes that “each form of adornment, fashion and lifestyle can be understood as a way of claiming agency to resist domination, invert disciplinary codes and experience “utopian moments.”¹⁵⁴ As social control has fostered numerous and distinct requirements in terms of bodily appearance, and in how the body is supposed to be displayed and adorned, there has also emerged the phenomenon of a transgressive aesthetic in fashion, body adornment and in culture in general, as we have also seen in chapter 3.2.2. In their subversive potential Langman locates the similarity with the Carnival. He observes that just like the Carnival, those expressions of transgression are tolerated, even desired and valued as fashion and lifestyles in our contemporary Western societies. This raises the question why?

Common assumptions might argue that our societies have experienced a major liberation in almost all spheres of society: the recent decades have witnessed a sexual revolution, a gay movement and the formation of LGBTQ-identities, the women’s movement, the hippies, the punks, New Age movements and so on. Often we believe that our

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 662.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 657.

contemporary societies' toleration and acceptance of marginalized communities and their appearance is a result of their struggles. And it is certainly true. But what we are observing today is not only a (predominant) acceptance but their incorporation in fashion and lifestyle products, that is, they are objectified, in a way made appealingly „grotesque“, and ultimately neutralized. We can observe how visual and aesthetic expressions that were strongly associated with groups and minorities from the social periphery in which they had a subversive meaning and purpose (including tattooing) have become fashionable and consumable for the mainstream of society and thus, incorporated in the dominant culture. It is through this, the element of consumerism, that Langman considers the rebellious potential, the critique those expressions once entailed absorbed by the dominant culture. He states, “[...] in late capitalist society, critique and resistance became incorporated within the society Carnivalization qua resistance, contextualized by global capital, has itself become a commodity that serves to alleviate the strains and tensions of the contemporary world and at the same time profits from providing amelioration.”¹⁵⁵ This observations is especially illuminating taking into consideration the theoretical context of this thesis, namely the assumption of both complex and subtle relations of power as a highly determining factor of a series of cultural, social, political and economic features of our modern societies, including tattooing and how it was practised in those societies since its rediscovery. Against this background, we can hardly assume that the growing toleration and moreover, adoption of (initially) transgressive expressions is a matter of chance. As we have elaborated already, while power ceased to operate as open aggression and domination in the form of physical superiority in our modern Western societies is almost obsolete, we are dealing with a significantly more subtle exercise of power that is so well disguised that we are hardly aware of it. The element of consumerism operates exactly like that. The moment in which what is supposed to serve as a means of subverting domination and overcoming alienation, becomes consumable, it is incorporated into society and the dominant culture, and thus, stripped off of its subversive potential.¹⁵⁶

Specifically examining our example of tattooing we have seen how on the one hand, it can certainly serve for an individual to reclaim control over his body, to rewrite external inscription, and to invert disciplinary codes. But on the other hand, we have to acknowledge

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 660.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 661.

that on the level of society as a whole the subversive potential has in the last decades been absorbed, exactly through the appropriation of the middle class. It is this moment, the moment when tattooing became accepted and even fashionable when it was subjected to consumerism and the rules of capitalism, that the meaning it once was invested with, namely resistance, is neutralized. It was incorporated in the dominant culture, and even more: it actually serves to sustain its cultural domination. Because when the practice was appropriated by the middle class it did not simply add another form of tattooing to those already existing. It transformed tattooing in a way that established a new border going right through the entire tattoo community and it is congruent with those dividing the classes. It fostered the emergence of a new elite that again installed an upper-class control of the practice and that rendered other forms of tattooing invisible, undesirable, deviant, abnormal.¹⁵⁷ As Langman points out: “Late capitalism could not only incorporate its own critique, but profit from that critique.”¹⁵⁸ This, I believe, can be considered the missing link in order to explain how tattooing could be embraced by the middle class as a mainstream phenomenon while it was previously strongly rejected by it invested with the semiological meaning of deviance. Therefore, I argue that the phenomenon of carnivalization as a manifestation of relations of power and an underlying dominant culture is a necessary element to explain the middle-class appropriation of tattooing.

Yet, I believe this is not sufficient in order to fully comprehend the process. There is one more aspect inherent in the process that I believe was necessary for tattooing to be adopted by the middle class and that is its transformation. As mentioned above, tattooing was not only appropriated but also transformed so that the middle-class execution of the practice notably differs from the way tattooing was performed in the working class. The bourgeoisification of tattooing happened on the base of a series of alterations and modifications of the practice that we can summarize under the term professionalization. This professionalization of tattooing would involve the amelioration of hygienic and sanitary standards, the qualification of the tattooist and the artistic pretension of the practice. The result of this transformation of tattooing is that it “[...] displaces the image of the

¹⁵⁷ Cf. De Mello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 135.

¹⁵⁸ Langman, Lauren, “Punk, Porn and Resistance: Carnivalization and the Body in Popular Culture”, *Current Sociology*, vol. 56/ nr. 4 (2008), p. 674.

working-class tattooed body - excessively, grotesquely tattooed - in favor of the more refined image of the middle-class body, which, even when tattooed, is elegant and disciplined.”¹⁵⁹

What does this mean? It means that through the transformation of tattooing the practice was modified in such a way that it corresponded to the middle-class norms and notions that disciplined the middle-class bodies to a certain behaviour. Let us recall at this point the most important aspects of the disciplining of bodies. The main and superordinate aim of the politics of the body was its preservation, its life and health in order to secure the persistence of the population. We have seen how a very specific knowledge of the body was produced that alongside with a set of norms disciplined members of the middle class to a rejection of tattooing as a deviant practice that incorporated a health hazard, an indicator of pathological deficiencies and an association with the lower classes. Taking into consideration what kind of modifications of tattooing were necessary to make it possible for the practice to be adopted by the middle class we can see how the transformation of tattooing determined it to comply with the original disciplinary code of the biopolitics. First of all, and this is probably the most apparent compliance, is achieved through the improvement of the sanitary conditions and hygiene in the tattoo parlours that very evidently serves to satisfy the biopolitics’ determination to life and health. Only under the condition of a reliable limitation of the risk of contagion and inflammation tattooing could ever be adopted by the middle class.

Secondly, the qualification of the tattooist serves a double function. Like sanitary improvement, it ensures proper execution of the practice, one that would “harm” the body in the most minimal way. We can see this very well illustrated, for instance, in the condemnation of self-trained tattooists that in the newly emerged middle-class elite of tattooing are referred to as “scratchers”. Their lack of supervised training is understood as a danger to the health of the client and considered harmful to the entire reputation of tattooing.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, the qualification of the tattooist and this is interrelated with the new artistic pretension of the practice, gave tattooing a whole new sophisticated appearance. The form of tattooing that has emerged from its engagement of agents of the fine arts has had a tremendous impact on the development of styles and imagery of contemporary tattooing. But

¹⁵⁹ DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 134.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 110.

not only that. Fine art tattooing has made the practice compliant with the disciplinary code of the biopolitics by reinterpreting it as decorating the body instead of violating it. This upward reevaluation of tattooing roots in a phenomenon that often occurs with the declaration of an object or a practice as art. “[...] objects defined as fine art, music, literature, and theater garner much prestige and status in society. While art results from a process of cultural construction, defining objects as art has status consequences for artistic consumers and producers.”¹⁶¹ As more and more agents with a background in the fine arts entered the stage of the tattoo community, tattooing has gained significantly in both acceptance and appreciation in the middle class. But the artistic pretension of the middle-class tattooing has another effect that is worth mentioning: it creates a social distance towards the lower classes and tattooing as it was performed in the working class. The artistic element in the middle-class form of the practice emphasizes its differences towards working-class tattooing and thus, disassociates its own exercise of the practice from the objections that once served to prevent members of the middle class to engage with the practice.

Altogether, and this is rather striking, we can observe how the transformation of tattooing enabled the disciplinary codes to still be valid and to operate even within a practice that before was invested with the semiological meaning of deviance. Thus, we can say that even inscribed bodies ultimately are still disciplined bodies in the middle-class form of the practice as it is performed in a compliant way.

3.2.4 The New Transgression

We have made three main observations in the chapter above. First of all, we have seen how tattooing as a transgressive expression has been appropriated by the middle class and thus incorporated in the dominant culture as a lifestyle and fashion product by which its subversive potential has been neutralized. Secondly, we observed that in the newly emerged middle-class form of tattooing one can still find the disciplinary code of the biopolitics at work. Finally, we claimed that with the bourgeoisification of tattooing a new elite has emerged in the tattoo community that claims control over the culture of tattooing and renders other forms of the practice, such as the working-class form deviant, illegitimate and less visible.

¹⁶¹ Irwin, Katherine, “Saints and Sinners: Elite Tattoo Collectors and Tattooists as Positive and Negative Deviants”, *Sociological Spectrum*, vol. 23/ nr. 1 (2003), p. 41.

Altogether this could lead to the assumption that this is the moment in which any aspect of resistance inherent in practising tattooing has evaporated in the market-based rules of late capitalism and commenced to be suppressed within a newly established oppressive class system within the tattoo community.

But, as we have seen before, it lies within the very nature of power to foster resistance, since it is even constituted by it. And as power is exercised upon free individuals the relations of power are always in flux which results in a perpetual struggle and contest, that is very well observable in the tattoo community as well. What happened when the middle-class entered the field and advanced to a new elite claiming the cultural control over the practice and installing an upper-class domination within the community, was not a replacement of the other forms of tattooing that had existed long before the practice was appropriated by the middle class. Members of other social classes did not cease to tattoo. Thus, what happened was a significant and constantly increasing fragmentation of the tattoo community alongside the borders of social classes and groups where there is a constant struggle over the culture of the practice. This struggle involves questions about how tattooing should be exercised, what reasons are considered legitimate to get tattooed and how the wearer of tattoos define themselves in relation to society and those who are not tattooed.¹⁶² This ongoing battle is very well examined by DeMello in *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*. She observes first of all, that the middle-class participation and its consequences have of course not been unnoticed by other agents within the tattoo community, and secondly that therefore one can witness a considerable preoccupation within both groups and their discourse about who gets to claim to exercise the practice in the more legitimate or authentic way. Through her thorough examination of both highbrow and lowbrow tattoo magazines and the multitude of interviews conducted with agents from all fractions of the tattoo community, DeMello has managed to draw a very illustrative picture of how much tattooing in its exercise and meaning is being contested among those who are practising it. As DeMello's efforts have resulted in an entire book, it is far too extensive for this thesis to take a profound look into all her findings, but I would like

¹⁶² Cf. DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 135.

to point out some that I consider particularly illuminating when investigating tattooing against the background of relations of power.

As indicated already, the middle-class form of tattooing relies thoroughly on the notion that tattooing carries a spiritual and artistic potential so that an exercise of the practice based on that notion is not only considered more sophisticated, but also more authentic. Deriving from this very central assumption of middle-class tattooing follows the sometimes more or less explicit critique of who they consider “outsiders” (agents within the tattoo community but outside the middle-class branch) for their ignorance about this cultural value of tattooing. As one can read in the first editorial of the highbrow tattoo magazine *International Tattoo Art* first released in 1992:

“Like a multi-faceted diamond, the world of tattooing presents aspects of the metaphysical, psychological, spiritual, poetic and artistic, and spans the spectrum from mundane to esoteric. ... In the modern world, the sailor’s arm is no longer the prime medium for sharing ideas among tattoo artists and tattoo fans. [...] Much of what has been written about tattooing has come from outside the profession by people who have little or no real knowledge of the subject. Some of us, however, are into tattooing for the long haul, and as far as I’m concerned if you ain’t in it for the long haul, you ain’t in it.”¹⁶³

First of all, what is very well represented in this editorial is the mentioned understanding of tattooing invested with a deeply spiritual and artistic meaning. Moreover, we can see a clear rejection of the tradition and old-fashioned way of tattooing within the declaration that the “sailor’s arm” has ceased to be the prime medium of tattooing. This is quite interesting as it, on the one hand, acknowledges the sailors’ tattooing as the root of the history of tattooing in the West, but on the other hand, disregards it as culturally obsolete. Thirdly, there is the construction of the idea of tattooing as a profession that implies proper training and a certain understanding of tattooing for the legitimacy of the practice itself and those who are practising it. Additionally, it creates a clear in- and out-group which are defined exactly by their degree of professionalism.

Altogether we can see the formation of an attitude towards the practice that claims its own exercise of the practice to be founded in a deep, legitimate and authentic understanding

¹⁶³ Shaw, J. in: *ITA* (no. I, 1992) in: DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, pp. 108-109.

of it, which at the same time renders other forms of tattooing ignorant, obsolete, deviant, and firmly placed in and “outsider” position.

That the valorization of one’s own form of practising tattooing is not accompanied by a toleration of other forms, but by a clear rejection and active defamation of them is very well illustrated by a letter that followed the first issue of the *ITA* written by tattooist Five Needle Fritz.

“After so many tasteless attempts at tattoo mags and the last few very important years being documented by sideliners, outsiders, and ham and eggers, it’s time someone within the community got their guacamole together to challenge the tyranny of those who are leeching off our tattoo culture. Hats off to you for attempting to portray tattooing in a way that does us proud, and mostly for showing us that this can be done from within the profession in a spirit of cooperation.”¹⁶⁴

We can see that other forms of tattooing are far from being tolerated, let alone accepted as their mere existence is already considered a tyranny. Of course, this disregard and hostility, as well as the middle-class claim of the cultural control over tattooing, has been noticed among those who are considered the “outsiders”. The struggle is very well represented in their discourse as well, as one can see when examining lowbrow tattoo magazines that are especially associated with biker tattooing. The *Tattoo* reader Eric E. wrote in a reader’s letter responding to middle-class defamation of biker tattooing:

“[...] So you think they [biker-type tattoos] are ugly and unattractive and project an image that turns off many people. All I can say is “Fuck you [...]” And next time you want to see ugly, outlaw biker tattoos, send me your address and I’ll make a trip to your place and give you a demonstration of something real.”¹⁶⁵

We can see that there is awareness about how the middle-class involvement in the tattoo community has fostered a stereotyping that formerly was emanated from outside the tattoo community and is now reproduced within the community. This confrontation of prejudice and disregard coming from fellow tattooists and tattoo fans has created a considerable hostility.

¹⁶⁴ Five Needle Fritz in: *ITA* (no. II, 1992) in: *ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁶⁵ E., Eric in: *Tattoo* (September 1992) in *ibid.*, p. 115.

My ink is not bad or offensive. I've had some of the best in the world run my ink. I just don't understand why these people can't just back off. [...] My personal opinion is that I'd rather be serving [in the military] with a few tattooed people than some little pencil-necks whose parents pulled a silver spoon out of their mouth after college, powdered their asses, and put them in the service to worry about how they look or when they can return home to tell their yuppie friends big war stories.¹⁶⁶

In this letter, we can observe a certain frustration about how the middle-class participation in tattooing has rendered the working-class and biker-type form of the practice condemned even within the community. Additionally, it becomes even more explicit that the borders dividing the tattoo community are congruent with those dividing the social classes as the growing middle-class influence is viewed as “yuppification” of tattooing.

All together we can observe that the middle-class appropriation of tattooing has not only diversified the tattoo community but significantly divided it into fractions which first of all consider themselves the more authoritative group and secondly, sometimes more and sometimes less hostilely battle over the culture of tattooing.

Nevertheless, I want to emphasize one more aspect that I have mentioned before but consider important at this point as well, namely that one can indeed witness a middle- and upper-class domination within the tattoo community which is fostered by its general domination in society. We can find it illustratively manifested, for instance, in the mainstream media coverage of tattooing which is characterized by a distinct disassociation of the middle-class form of the practice from its origins in the working class through a selective and stereotyping representation of the phenomenon of tattooing. They emphatically point out the contrast between the new respectability of the practice embraced by educated professionals and the disrepute of tattooing as practised by bikers, sailors and convicts. A clear division is created between two types of tattoo wearers: the highly-educated, white-collar and middle-class wearers on the one hand, and all the others, blurring the lines between them and often lumped together as low-class trash. Moreover, when reporting on tattooing mainstream media is also very selective in who they would interview as legitimate agents of the tattoo community. Non-middle-class tattooists or tattoo wearers are widely excluded and thus rendered invisible. And, as they cannot speak on their own behalf the condemning middle-class perspective on them is only reinforced.¹⁶⁷ The consequence is that any other

¹⁶⁶ Kirk in: *Tattoo*, September, 1991 in: *ibid.*, p. 116.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 99.

form of tattooing that is not middle class remains invested with the semiological meaning of deviance and/or resistance.

At this point, I would like to make clear that we are not only looking at a mere reproduction of the class struggle within the tattoo community. On closer inspection it becomes rather apparent that with the middle-class participation in tattooing and its neutralization of its subversive potential in the market-based rules of late capitalism, has not only developed an ongoing struggle of different fractions within the tattoo community, but has also fostered a new form of transgression in terms of style, imagery and the way tattooing is exercised. As indicated several times above, the middle-class engagement with the practice of tattooing has had several consequences, namely in the meaning that tattooing is invested with, and the degree of professionalism it is exercised with. The newly required professionalism and especially the related artistic pretension resulted in a significant change in terms of style and technical sophistication. What has emerged from this is a whole new aesthetic that is very distinct from old-fashioned and working-class tattooing. As already mentioned, the social media platform Instagram has become the main medium both for tattooists to share and promote their work, have exchange with other tattooists and for fans and customers for finding inspiration and even booking their appointments. Thus, the platform represents a considerably interesting and informative object of study regarding recent trends and developments in tattooing. While the imagery and style have been strongly diversified, one can always find the common denominator of an emphasis on technical skills that manifests itself in an increased use of thin lines, the incorporation of pointillism and very refined details and shades. Even large pieces are characterized by a highly detailed linework and compositions of a variety of line width and shading. One can even witness a new embrace of hand-made tattoos (“stick and poke” or “hand poke”) where no machines are used and the pieces are brought onto the skin dot by dot. This method is evidently more time-consuming and arduous than machine-made tattoos for both the tattooist and of course, the person that gets tattooed as he or she has to endure a considerably longer period of pain. Nevertheless, one can observe a great interest and high estimation of tattooists that manage to create large and highly detailed pieces even with this intricate method. Altogether, this technically sophisticated form of tattooing illustrates very well DeMello’s observation of how tattooing in the middle class with its aesthetics replaces the old-fashioned and working-class related imagery and line work that resulted in grotesquely tattooed bodies with a form of

tattooing that is rather decorative and refined, so that the middle-class body, even when tattooed, is still elegant and disciplined.¹⁶⁸

But this new mainstream aesthetic with its elaborate and sophisticated technical aspiration has fostered the emergence of styles and imagery that undermine the technically sophisticated pretence of mainstream tattooing and established a style with a deliberately less elaborate appearance, commonly referred to as *ignorant tattoos*. The style is characterized by simple designs and linework, usually black and white and often imitating the naïve and “ignorant” attempts of drawing of a child. This new, technically way less refined style is not the result of a lack of technical skill, but rather a new form of transgression as the practice of tattooing itself has been absorbed by the dominant culture as a fashionable product. Hence, the self-understanding of those who have developed the style: “[...] ignorant tattoos aren’t about a lack of education, it is more of a reaction or a rebellion against rules and standardization. It is an homage to freedom of expression without being tied down by convention or guidelines.”¹⁶⁹ This is a rather interesting aspect as it reveals that there is not only an ongoing struggle within the tattoo community about the culture of tattooing that runs along the borders of the social classes. There is also a struggle of agents in the tattoo community that (regardless of their class affiliation) seek to overcome aesthetics that have become too ubiquitous and dominant by developing new expressions of transgression.

But late capitalism is fast and rapidly this underground form of tattooing developed a high demand. Tattooists started to embrace the ignorant tattoos not only as a form of subverting mainstream aesthetics but as a means of making actual profit.¹⁷⁰ As even the ignorant tattoos became fashionable and appealing to the middle class and thus ubiquitous, one can observe a radicalization of this style towards considerably unrefined scribbles that are clearly aiming at the most sophisticated appearance possible. Since the fast pace in which markets are able to absorb and ignite new trends (even when they are initially of a subversive or at least critical character) was only reinforced with the emergence of social media, one can assume that this process was only accelerated. We can observe how this struggle manifests itself in a series of trends. For instance, I have mentioned the ignorant tattoos that served exactly this purpose of a new transgression for a while before they, as well, became too

¹⁶⁸ DeMello, Margo, *Bodies of Inscription: A cultural history of the modern tattoo community*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, p. 134.

¹⁶⁹ <https://info.painfulpleasures.com/blogs/ignorant-tattoos>

¹⁷⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

omnipresent and fashionable and thus deprived of their rebellious character. Recently one can find a radicalization of this already unrefined style towards even more row, even brute scribbles, that I believe to be a reaction to the generalization of the ignorant tattoos.

Another development that we can recently observe is the ever-increasing embrace of home-made tattoos that ultimately represent one of the last transgressions in tattooing that not only undermines the middle-class requirement of professionalism in tattooing but also represents an escape from the disciplining of the body politics. The lack of professional standards in both the technical skills and the sanitation and hygiene when tattooing oneself at home is clearly not compliant with the health oriented body politics and can represent an active revolt against them. The fact that tattoo supplies can be ordered online by anyone and that it has been well embraced and lead to people tattooing themselves or others without any training has even raised legal attention. In Germany for instance, the governing party CDU is pushing an initiative in order to regulate the admittance to profession supported by middle-class tattoo organizations.¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, we can observe an increasing exercise of home-made tattooing in all the social milieus represented in the tattoo community, including members of the middle class.

The fact of this cross-class embracing of self-made tattoos is rather striking as it evidently undermines both the standards of the dominant mainstream culture of tattooing and the disciplining of the body politics emanating from the middle class. It is rather puzzling how even middle-class members have developed a relation towards their bodies that allows them to deliberately “violate” their bodies themselves. Moreover, we find ourselves within a social context of an enormous and ubiquitous health trend that manifests itself in the emphasis of diet, training and mental exercises. Discourse relating to these subjects go through the entire social body, and have ignited especially with social media, producing the omnipresent imperative of self-improvement. It stands to reason that the trend of self-made tattoos might be traced back to the incorporation of tattooing in the dominant culture. Nevertheless, I believe that it would be illuminating as well to examine this phenomenon against the theoretical background of the bio-politics that I consider culminating and perfectly represented in the recent health hype, again thoroughly incorporated in and reinforced by late capitalism. Thus, I believe it worth to consider that the trend of self-made tattoos might as well be rooted in both an oversaturation of this omnipresent imperative of self-optimization

¹⁷¹ Cf. <https://www.deutschlandfunknova.de/beitrag/update-ruecktritt-may-kantinen-essen-tattoo-trends>

and in a correlated growing awareness about how thoroughly our bodies are politically invested and socially constructed. This might be specially reinforced by both the women's movement and the LGBTQ-community radically questioning gender roles and the biological determination of sex and identity. I believe this matter an interesting subject for another philosophical inquiry.

Altogether, what we are witnessing is tattooists and tattoo fans, subjects of our contemporary Western societies in the quest for new expressions in tattooing that go beyond mainstream aesthetic and practical conventions. It is their attempt of a stylistic and practical restoration of the subversive rebellious potential of tattooing after the practice itself has long been appropriated by the dominant culture.

3.2.5 Tattooing as a Technology of the Self

We have seen now how tattooing has been invested with different semiological meanings in the West according to underlying relations of power and the everlasting interplay between power and resistance. First, the practice of tattooing had been rendered deviant due to the bio-politics that have emerged since the Classical Age and penetrated the entire social body fostering a desired health-affirming behaviour and creating a social distance to the working class. Thus, it was the dominant culture that marginalized tattooing and those who were exercising the practice, but it was also this stigmatization that only ever paved the way for a reinterpretation of tattooing as a practice of resistance. Only because tattooing had been invested with the semiological meaning of deviance, individuals deliberately and fully aware of the social stigma wearing tattoos nevertheless could ever bear a subversive potential. Facing the cultural domination, the stigma and the control over one's body, the act of tattooing can be understood as an act of developing agency and reclaiming control over one's body by subverting the disciplinary code and undermining the related aesthetics. Yet, we have seen how tattooing has spread into the middle class and how this should not only be understood as a process of liberation or growing tolerance but rather as a process of appropriation that has neutralized the subversive potential of tattooing and dissolved it in the market-based rules of late capitalism. Undoubtedly tattooing has developed into a fashion product that is not only consumed by the middle class but also reinterpreted in its meaning, exercise and aesthetics by it. What we can observe now is a struggle within the tattoo community about the assumed legitimacy and authenticity of the different approaches

towards the practice and the related aesthetics on one hand, and the pursuit of agents in the tattoo community to develop new transgressive styles and imagery in order to restore the rebellious potential of tattooing after it had long been appropriated by the dominant culture. Even though other social groups than the middle class have remained exercising tattooing and their approach and aesthetics still carries a certain stigma and therefore subversive potential, those forms are far less visible and tend to disappear in the shadow of the dominant middle-class exercise of tattooing.

Nevertheless, I argue, that this socio-cultural absorption of the resistant element of tattooing does not disqualify the moment in which a subject develops agency over its body and deliberately inscribes it with an inverted normative code.

I suggest that taking into account this very specific function tattooing can assume for an individual, tattooing could qualify as what Foucault refers to as a *technology of the self*. He conceptualizes the technologies of the self, in the late period of his work, alongside three other types of practical reason (technologies of production, technologies of signs, technologies of power) that he considers to serve as a means for an individual to develop knowledge and understanding of itself. The technologies of the self “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”¹⁷²

Those techniques, which are part of an Ancient tradition of a cultivation of the self assume particular relevance in Foucault’s conception of *ethics* which he does not simply understand as compliance with certain prescribed rules of behaviour but as one’s relationship with oneself, that is, it “determines how the individual is supposed to constitute oneself as a moral subject of his own actions.”¹⁷³ This conceptualization of ethics or at least the foundation for ethics as independent from cultural or social norms (moral prescriptions) is central to Foucault’s understanding not without reason but rooted in the fact that he derived his understanding of the technologies of the self mainly from an analysis of the self-transformative practices one can find in Greek and Roman philosophy. Those pagan

¹⁷² Foucault, Michel. *The Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1988, p. 18.

¹⁷³ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Works in Progress*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 263.

techniques of the philosophical cultivation of the self, the “care of the self”¹⁷⁴, are thoroughly based on the “idea that ethics can be a very strong structure for existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system with a disciplinary structure.”

¹⁷⁵ This entails a rather important implication, namely the possibility of an ethics independent from its social, political or economic context, that allows an individual, under the application and exercise of certain techniques, to constitute itself as a subject without being exclusively determined by its surrounding social reality.

I want to emphasize this point because especially against the theoretical background of this thesis it is rather striking. First of all, this notion contests the rather widespread conviction in our society that there is a determining link between political structures surrounding us and our ethics, ergo the way we ought to constitute ourselves.¹⁷⁶

Secondly, so far I have argued rather the opposite. I have elaborated thoroughly on the notion of the inscription of bodies which is centred around the idea that the social reality we find ourselves in is inscribed on our bodies and determines the way we understand ourselves, how we behave and relate to ourselves and others, how we perceive ourselves and our existence. I have argued that there is no such thing as a human essence that remains constant throughout the course of history and that on the contrary, the way we constitute ourselves, is highly related to underlying relations of power. And, as I believe this thesis has shown this is certainly true. We have seen how thoroughly we are integrated in a disciplinary system in which power so subtly coerces us to a certain behaviour that we do not even recognize it as such and instead internalize the disciplinary codes so much that we almost believe them to constitute our identity. It was able to make people believe, for instance, that wearing a tattoo indicates deviance, whether in the form of disease, mental deficiencies or just a lack of discipline. Moreover, it made people believe that they do not want tattoos, not simply because it carried that stigma, but because they believed that stigma to be true. Finally, because they believed that stigma to be true they also judged and condemned others on behalf of wearing tattoos.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Foucault, Michel. *The Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1988, p.19.

¹⁷⁵ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Works in Progress*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 260.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 261.

Foucault's thought has, in fact, centered around this very assumption for a long time. Especially his works from the 70's have contributed to a deep understanding of how thoroughly we are situated in oppressing and disciplining structures and how efficiently power manages to penetrate our very selves and thus, govern our conduct.¹⁷⁷ Whence, the notion of the subject as fully determined by relations of power. Nevertheless, while Foucault did not overthrow this entire concept of disciplinary power and social control, he conceded in the late phase of his thought that it did not depict the whole picture by acknowledging the possibility of an active subject that is able to constitute itself not entirely independently, but at least alongside the external powers it is exposed to.¹⁷⁸ This means that, even though we find ourselves in a disciplinary society in which coercive mechanisms operate in an extremely subtle way on every level of the social body, the self is not given to us and must not necessarily be completely dominated, coerced and subjected to external disciplinary powers. There is a domain of freedom that the individual can find, conquer and cultivate.¹⁷⁹ As the self is determinable by our social realities, it is determinable by ourselves as well. This is where the technologies of the self come into play as a means of forming ourselves.

As mentioned, the main historical example of such self-forming and -cultivating techniques Foucault refers to is the Greek and Roman care of the self. They serve as an exceptional model of the technologies of the self and as such as means of creating, shaping and mastering oneself.¹⁸⁰ Any moral prescription that was derived from these ethics did not have a coercive purpose nor effect, even though they did entail a great series of quite austere rules. They did not attempt to normalize society and their purpose was not to produce a certain behaviour in the population.¹⁸¹ Moreover, they were not concerned at all with any religious problem or the problematization of an afterlife and how to attain it. Instead, they were fundamentally concerned with the *tekhnē tou biou*, the art of life, that is to say with the question of how to live. Thus, it was an ethics concerned with the aesthetics of life. And the

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Faustino, Marta, "Ethics of the Self as Practice of Freedom and Resistance in the late Foucault", in: A. Marques & J. Sáàgua (eds.), *Essays on Values and Practical Rationality – Ethical and Aesthetical Dimensions*, Bern / Bruxelles / New York / Oxford / Warszawa, Wien, Peter Lang, 2018, p. 103.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Works in Progress*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 262.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Faustino, Marta, "Ethics of the Self as Practice of Freedom and Resistance in the late Foucault", in: A. Marques & J. Sáàgua (eds.), *Essays on Values and Practical Rationality – Ethical and Aesthetical Dimensions*, Bern / Bruxelles / New York / Oxford / Warszawa, Wien, Peter Lang, 2018, p. 106.

¹⁸¹ Cf. Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Works in Progress*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 254.

art of life is a problem of personal choice: to dedicate oneself to the aim of attaining a more beautiful, perfect or complete life, not worrying about what happens after death.¹⁸² The art of living is a *tekhnē*, a technique and therefore requires exercise to be learned. It is learned through *askēsis*, the training of the self on the self.¹⁸³ Moreover, the care of the self represents a technique to practice one's freedom, which was constituted as "[...] non-slavery: to be free meant not being the slave of another person, city, ruler or one's passions and appetites."¹⁸⁴ Thus, in the care of the self lies a moment that contests power. The care of the self as the exercise of one's freedom restricted the possibility of power being abused and exerted excessively over oneself.

These practices of self-examination and cultivation have been central to the philosophical thought in Ancient Greece, according to Foucault. With the advent of Christianity they did not disappear, but they have been reinterpreted and served different ends in monastic ascetism. The technologies of the self, and especially the practice of self-examination, are not applied anymore in order to train oneself in the mastery of oneself and to practice one's freedom. The new aim is to decipher oneself, the part of the self and the thoughts that do not lead towards God, that deprive one's soul from salvation and that therefore, have to be renounced.¹⁸⁵ In this absorption of the care of the self in the Christian imperative of self-renunciation Foucault sees one of the main reasons for the obliteration of the tradition for the care of the self, alongside with the 'Cartesian Moment', that symbolically marks the parting of philosophical inquiry from spiritual transformation towards the notion of self-evidence (alone) constituting knowledge.¹⁸⁶ These two developments have caused the care of the self to be neglected or forgotten in the modern age and thought, and moreover, (despite some attempts) they have never been successfully restored. This is problematic because, as Foucault points out, our contemporary Western societies are struggling with a situation in which this approach of a self-forming activity as a foundation for a new ethics could be of relevance as well. Religion is no longer sufficient for most people to derive ethics

¹⁸² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 260.

¹⁸³ Cf. Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. Self-Writing*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 208.

¹⁸⁴ Faustino, Marta, "Ethics of the Self as Practice of Freedom and Resistance in the late Foucault", in: A. Marques & J. Sáàgua (eds.), *Essays on Values and Practical Rationality – Ethical and Aesthetical Dimensions*, Bern / Bruxelles / New York / Oxford / Warszawa, Wien, Peter Lang, 2018, p. 110.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Foucault, Michel. *The Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1988, p.19.

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Faustino, Marta, "Ethics of the Self as Practice of Freedom and Resistance in the late Foucault", in: A. Marques & J. Sáàgua (eds.), *Essays on Values and Practical Rationality – Ethical and Aesthetical Dimensions*, Bern / Bruxelles / New York / Oxford / Warszawa, Wien, Peter Lang, 2018, p. 18

from and at the same time we seek a personal life and existence independent from political and legal interference. Our contemporary modern societies have thus seen a series of liberation movements, that do have their legitimation, and yet “suffer from the fact that they cannot find any principle on which to base the elaboration of a new ethics.”¹⁸⁷ I think that in the strive for freedom and for the possibility of constituting ourselves outside of religious, ideological and / or legal structures lies a very crucial point. It is the theme of liberation that defines our struggle and this struggle for liberation can be understood as an indicator for domination, just as Foucault suggests to use the examination of resistance in order to locate the application of power relations.¹⁸⁸ The very fact of our contemporary modern societies being characterized by their strive for liberation reveals the domination we are confronted with or, in other words, the disciplining power we are constantly subjected to and its extent. It even manifests itself in the very struggle of contemporary liberation movements to find a proper foundation for their ethics. As Foucault points out, they are not able to find any other source for their ethics than “so-called scientific knowledge of what the self is, what desire is, what the unconscious is, and so on”¹⁸⁹ and this in itself is problematic. As we have seen, scientific knowledge bears an immense coercive effect, not only by its normalizing potential alone but because it is itself thoroughly integrated in the disciplinary apparatus and even constitutes one of its most effective mechanisms. The production of knowledge is directly linked with the relations of power. Whence the problematic of scientific knowledge serving as a source for ethics: how can an integral part of the disciplining power serve as a valid foundation for an ethics of liberation?

Thus, scientific knowledge is not unproblematic as a foundation for ethics, but, according to Foucault, it is also not necessary to think ethical problems with recourse to scientific knowledge. There are other tools that can serve that purpose: “Among the cultural inventions of mankind there is a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot exactly be reactivated but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what’s going on now - and to change it.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 255.

¹⁸⁸ Cf. Foucault, Michel, “The Subject and Power”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8/ nr. 4 (1982), p. 780.

¹⁸⁹ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 256.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

This is where, I believe, we can locate tattooing as a technology of the self, that is, as a cultural technique or procedure that has been practised in various cultural contexts with a wide range of social functions, and that in our contemporary Western societies can constitute a new form of a self-forming practice. This notion seems rather similar to the widespread idea in the middle class that tattooing should be exercised with recourse to its spiritual, poetic, etc. meaning in other exotic or ancient cultures. Yet, I refrain from this idea for two reasons. First of all, as Foucault points out, those techniques that we can find in other cultures cannot simply be reactivated. Even under the notion of recreating a certain cultural meaning of tattooing and exercising it accordingly, one will not be able to restore the practice to its original form. The idea of simply reactivating a practice, in this case, tattooing, in a new historical context misses the point of emphasizing the practice's value or potential for one's own specific historical condition.

Secondly, and this is interrelated with the first point of my critique, I believe the middle-class notion on this matter is way too dogmatic. As this thesis has shown, middle-class agents in the tattoo community have developed to a new elite that is very exclusive about other approaches on tattooing, renders them deviant, less visible and less legitimate. In this exclusion and determination to one allegedly authentic exercise of the practice lies the failure to recognize the practice of tattooing valid for anyone as a legitimate means of forming oneself, independently of a cultural or ideological foundation or justification.

Even though in Ancient times, these technologies, the training of the self on the self consisted in the practice of abstinences, self-examinations, meditation, writing to oneself and others, listening, memorization etc.¹⁹¹, we can think of contemporary practices which do not identify with the Ancient ones but might fulfill a similar role. I, for instance, believe that the practice of tattooing can entail two aspects that can qualify it as a technology of the self, without regard to how it is exercised in terms of style, artistic pretence, or in regard of a presupposed meaning. First of all, and this is very much linked with the notion that the self is not an eternal essence, tattooing can serve this notion's practical implication of the necessity of creating oneself. From the theoretical insight that the self is not given to us, Foucault

¹⁹¹ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. Self-Writing*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 208.

derives the consequence that “we have to create ourselves as a work of art.”¹⁹² Under this assumption, he criticizes as well our contemporary notion of art that is only presumed in objects, not in individuals or the life that they are leading. It is an activity reserved for experts, the artists, and their creativity is believed to be the outcome of their relation towards themselves. Foucault on the other hand, suggests that we have to acknowledge art, the creative act in the very formation of the self, where an individual constitutes itself as a subject, where it creates itself, precisely because he establishes a relationship with himself, which is not determined by external powers and takes responsibility for his own being.¹⁹³

When asking people who are wearing tattoos cutting across social borders most of the answers will involve statements about identity. Often the tattooed body is understood as the expression of an inner self.¹⁹⁴ While Foucault would not endorse the idea of an „inner self“, this widespread idea shows very well the link between tattooing and subjectivity and its function of constituting identity. Thus, the tattoo is understood as a concretization of the self on its surface, the skin. Through the modification of one’s surface, the individual inscribes its relationship towards itself and, at the same time, towards its surrounding, as it constitutes itself as a subject visibly for others with a certain identity. Through the tattoo the subject comes to matter. Thus, we can see that the tattoo is not only a superficial modification of the skin, but that there is a deep relation between the surface and the self. Foucault himself did not provide a philosophical account on tattooing but, interestingly enough, he mentioned the practice in 1966 in the radio feature *Les Hétérotopies/ Le corps utopique* in which he describes “other” cultural, institutional and discursive spaces in which the social norms are not or only partially in operation. It is striking when taking into account that this period of his work is rather characterized by his analysis of how the human subject is constituted within an oppressive system, but in this very essay he conceptualizes the body, the locus that is so thoroughly embedded within a network of disciplinary mechanisms that are directed at it, as a possible “other space”. Body modifications, and he even mentions tattooing among them, can serve as means of transforming the body to another space. “Mask, tattoo and make-up place the body into another space, they transfer it to another location that does not directly belong

¹⁹² Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress*. New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 262.

¹⁹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 261.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Sullivan, Nikki, “The Somatechnics of Bodily Inscription: Tattooing”, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 10 (2009), p. 129.

to this world. They transfer the body into a part of the imaginary.”¹⁹⁵ He claims, tattoos have the capability to transfer the body to a space that does not belong to this world: the body steps out of the world in which it is caught up in a disciplinary structure to which it is subjected. Now the body rather belongs to an imaginary world, it belongs to the subject, its individual identity. In this case, Foucault claims, that the body is “in its materiality and physicality just as much a product of its own imagination.”¹⁹⁶ The body is a product of its imagination, the body is product of its self, its ident not of its external surrounding. Whence, the strong relation between the self and the tattoo on its surface: it is not just a superficial inscription or decoration, it is the self constituting itself on its body.

Moreover, this moment of self-creation does not (necessarily) end when the tattooist has finished. The assumption that the tattoo is a definite expression of the self is a misconception due to the failure to take into account that there is no objective meaning of any tattoo and that moreover, the meaning can change over time even for its bearer. The space that the self has according to Foucault, conquered with the tattoo, can be “inhabited” throughout time and as the subject evolves and reconstitutes itself. As Sullivan in her analysis of tattoos against the notion of the *somatechnics*¹⁹⁷ points out:

Tattoos neither contain nor represent a fixed referential reality, or, to put it in another way, the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and unstable. [...] the tattoo is not simply reducible to a symbolic representation of the truth of the subject, but rather is inseparable from the subject and can be understood as a process (rather than an object) in and through which the ambiguous and open-ended character of identity and of meaning is constantly (re)negotiated through relations with others and through a world. [...] the tattoo will generate different meanings depending on a range of factors including the embodied history of the subject [...].¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ “Maske, Tätowierung und Schminke versetzen den Körper in einen anderen Raum, an einen anderen Ort, der nicht direkt zu dieser Welt gehört. Sie machen den Körper zu einem Teil des imaginären Raums.”, Foucault, Michel, *Die Heterotopien. Der utopische Körper*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017, p. 31, translated by the author.

¹⁹⁶ “[...] in seiner Stofflichkeit und Fleischlichkeit gleichsam Produkt seiner eigenen Fantasmen.”, *Ibid.*, p. 33, translated by the author.

¹⁹⁷ The term “somatechnics” was created in the course of a discussion held at Macquarie University due to the limitations of the term “body modifications” as it implies the understanding of the body as a pre-existing object. To emphasize that the body is constituted within a complex network of power, relations, technologies, disciplines, etc. the term “somatechnics” was developed to indicate the necessary interrelation between the body (soma) and techniques and technologies (technics); Cf. <https://somatechnics.wordpress.com/about-somatechnics/>.

¹⁹⁸ Sullivan, Nikki, “The Somatechnics of Bodily Inscription: Tattooing”, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 10 (2009), pp. 132.

Thus, the tattoo, as permanent as it is visually on the skin, is highly changeable in its meaning for the wearer. When inked it can help to constitute the wearer's identity, to create him or herself, to conquer the "other space". But the creative activity is not only momentary, it does not result in an object (the tattoo), but in lifelong process of recreating its meaning and oneself. Therefore we can understand tattooing as a practice of the self, as a means to create and recreate oneself and one's identity, to write oneself and one's story - as a means for an individual to constitute itself as a subject.

Moreover, I would like to consider one more implication of Foucault's notion of art as a creative activity that is not exclusively reserved for experts. In the context of his aesthetics of existence, the creative act is to be located in the very formation of the self. This notion of art applied to the case of tattooing implies a shift concerning where we can locate the artistic element of the practice: it is no longer the tattooist (or tattoo artist as often used) who is the artist. The creative act is not qualified by the skill of the tattooist, the technical refinement or the sophistication of the drawing. The creative act lies within the one who gets tattooed, the (future) bearer of the tattoo and its act of self-forming.

Altogether we can see how this self-constituting function of tattooing can qualify as a technology of the self in the sense that it enables an individual to create and shape oneself, despite being exposed to external powers and their impact in its subjectivity.

In this very activity of the subject constituting itself as such in a disciplinary society lies another functional aspect of the technologies of the self that I believe that tattooing can comply as well. Foucault emphasizes that one should not misunderstand power as inherently bad. Relations of power as strategies of governing conduct are indispensable in society. Thus, the challenge is not to annul them, but "to acquire the rules of law, the management of techniques, and also the morality, the ethos, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible."¹⁹⁹

I have elaborated thoroughly on how in our modern Western societies our bodies are politically invested, disciplined and subjected, and how the exercise of tattooing against this politico-historical background of the bio-politics signified a subversion of the disciplinary code and resistance against the dominant culture. We have seen how individuals, fully aware

¹⁹⁹ Foucault, Michel, *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of* New York: The New Press, 1997, p. 298.

of the stigma, developed agency over their bodies and deliberately permanently marked themselves with this sign of deviance and stigma and thus subverted the disciplinary code. It is this very specific moment that retains the subversive potential of tattooing even though the practice itself has already been incorporated in the dominant culture. It is this moment that demonstrates that tattooing as a practice between discipline and deviance does not simply end with the appropriation of the practice by the middle class, just as our ethics does not necessarily have to be exclusively determined by social, political and/or economic structures.

Thus, what we have seen is how tattooing has served as a practice of freedom in a disciplinary society. As Foucault points out, relations of power are necessary, but they have to be prevented from developing into (excessive) domination. Power has to be controlled, it has to be limited, it has to be contested, or in other words, there has to be resistance, there has to be the practice of the freedom.²⁰⁰ Tattooing has been absorbed by the dominant culture, late capitalism has transformed it into a fashion product and Langman is right when he claims that this entire process displaces resistance from the political realm of action to the cultural realm where it is neutralized and ultimately benefits the dominant culture.²⁰¹ But this does not disqualify the moment in which an individual in a disciplinary society under the regime of the biopolitics decides to get a tattoo with a particular subversive and self-shaping idea in mind, thus exercising its freedom and constituting itself as a subject, and thereby limiting power. The exercise of tattooing against the socio-political context of our contemporary Western societies has, by subverting and questioning the disciplinary and aesthetic code, ultimately loosened it, as it still does. Tattooing can serve as a practice of freedom in a disciplinary society and as such contest and limit power, while at the same time, at least to a certain extent and in certain segments, potentially contributing for a process of self-cultivation of individuals.

²⁰⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 284.

²⁰¹ Cf. Langman, Lauren, "Punk, Porn and Resistance: Carnivalization and the Body in Popular Culture", *Current Sociology*, vol. 56/ nr. 4 (2008), p. 674.

4 .Conclusion: Contemporary Western Tattooing as a Practice between Discipline and Deviance

This thesis aimed to find conclusive answers to the questions raised by the development of the practice of tattooing since its rediscovery in the West by taking into account the underlying relations of power in our modern Western societies. The way tattooing has developed is rather puzzling but, as this thesis has aimed to show, far from being a matter of chance. The main questions posed by the cultural history of tattooing in the West were why tattooing could be embraced by the working class while it was strongly rejected by the middle class, how the practice could later be embraced by the very same class as a mainstream phenomenon while it was previously strongly rejected by it, and whether under the notion of the inscription of social realities on individuals there remains a possibility of developing agency and counterinscription.

The first question raised by the fact that tattooing was rapidly embraced by the working class as a popular practice while it was rejected and stigmatized by the middle class has been addressed by relating this phenomenon to the power relations as they, according to Foucault, have emerged since the Classical Age together with the modern state. We have identified the explanation not only for the question why tattooing had provoked such different stances towards it along the borders of the social classes, but also how and why tattooing could ever be invested with the semiological meaning of deviance in the middle class in the first place. The disciplinary societies that our modern Western societies are, thoroughly incorporate a form of power that very subtly, and thus highly efficiently produces a certain desired behaviour of the individuals of a population. It is applied on free subjects without the use of force or violence and way beyond the legal apparatus. Instead, it operates through a series of discourses, institutions and instruments that go through the entire social body. It is so efficient precisely because in the form of these subtle mechanisms it remains almost unperceived and individuals incorporate it unconsciously.

I have thoroughly elaborated on the effect of the instruments norm and knowledge, as I believe them to be particularly significant in the development of tattooing in the West: it is through norms, knowledge and the related discourse that tattooing has been constituted as deviant. In fact, this early chapter of the history of tattooing in the West represents an exemplary case of a process of normalization that explains how it was possible that it has never come to a legal ban and yet large parts of the population have been successfully kept

from engaging with it: on behalf of its identification as abnormal. The (scientific) discourse had created a deep association between tattooing and disease, mental deficiencies and anti-social behaviour, in general with socially undesirable features that are considered deviating from a norm, the socially intended and designed order. Through the analysis of tattooing by the human sciences, the practice was not only suspected to breach with a legal order, but with a natural one. It was the scientific discourse that invested tattooing with the association of perversity, criminality and mental disease and thus legitimized the rejection of tattooing with the recourse to an assumed natural, human norm. The suggestion of a deviance from assumed normality that is defined by nature is central to the process of normalization and its coercive effect is immense. In the case of tattooing, this mechanism by itself was sufficient to make the middle class abstain from the practice and making legal interventions unnecessary. Thus, we can consider the phenomenon of the middle-class abstinence from tattooing as exemplary of the efficacy of disciplinary power.

While the operation of disciplinary power discloses how the middle-class rejection of tattooing was produced, that is to say under the use of which instruments and mechanisms, two questions remain. First of all, why was it rendered deviant in the first place and secondly, how come these disciplining mechanisms did not apply on members of the working-class where tattooing rapidly spread as popular practice. In order to explain that, I have examined the emergence of the bio-politics. According to Foucault, they developed as a consequence of a severe shift in the relations of power in the course of the Classical Age from sovereign monarchs towards the social body. Through this transformation, the social body has gained a whole new importance and with that its survival as well: the guarantee of its persistence became the new superordinate and directive aim of power. What was at stake was the preservation of life and therefore the health of the social body. Under this historical revision, the human body was invested with a whole new value and constituted as a central concern of power. Thus, any norm, knowledge or discipline deriving from it centred around the body and its health.

What was produced was a whole new corpus of knowledge and it was a knowledge of the body. This is when the human sciences emerged and soon became the main driving force in its production and subsequent establishing and legitimization of new norms concerning the body; this is when the human body started to be exploited as an object of knowledge, in the name of its health. The immense corpus of knowledge produced by this new technology of

power centered around the body, mainly produced and legitimized by the human sciences (as Medicine, Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, etc.), spread through the entire social body in the form of norms and notions concerning our body and mind, thus producing our definition of physical and mental health. It has resulted in norms and behavioural rules for our sexuality, appearance, behaviour, diet, exercise, etc.: all under the superordinate imperative of physical integrity. And it is under this superordinate imperative of physical integrity that we can comprehend the entire scientific discourse on tattooing that without exception categorized the practice as a deviance from this imperative, whether in the form of perversity, mental deficiency, criminal behaviour or as a health hazard. It was the human sciences that established the norm of which tattooing was rendered deviant, and it is this norm, the norm of physical and mental health, that explains the middle-class abstinence from the practice.

But why did this entire technology of the body apparently not have any impact on members of the working class? Among them the practice was very much endorsed and practiced without any of the mentioned concerns. Again, the answer lies within the relations of power. The technology of the body has emerged alongside with the modern state and the related shift in the power relations. It emerged as a technology of sustaining life, but the life in question was mainly the life of one class, the class in power, the bourgeoisie. It was their bodies that mattered. The working-class bodies on the other hand, were not of concern for a long time. This is how the working class escaped the disciplining of this technology of the body - also in the case of tattooing. The entire corpus of knowledge was simply not accessible to them, and the relevant norms, considering health standards were not directed at them. Other norms and rules were, applied differently depending on the body and life at stake. Thus, the disciplinary mechanism that so successfully produced the middle-class rejection of tattooing did not produce the same result in the working-class as it was simply not applied.

The second question raised by the development of tattooing in the West, reinforced by the findings concerning the first question is, how it was ever possible for tattooing to be adopted by the middle class nevertheless? As we have seen, the answer lies within a two-fold process. First of all, we have to consider this development against the theoretical background of the relations of power. To do so I have reflected on the concept of carnivalization as Lauren Langman has described it with recourse to Mikhail Bakhtin. The concept describes how transgressive expressions for instance extreme body modifications such as tattooing,

sooner or later will be incorporated in the dominant culture by appropriating it, by consuming it (as a fashion product) and thus, disassociating it from its countercultural context of resistance. I have shown how we can witness this process as well in the case of tattooing. The formerly working-class practice had not only been the mark of deviance: as such it has also provoked the deliberate use and practice of tattooing as a means of expressing discontent and the subversion of mainstream values. The transgression was not only an involuntary one designated by the dominant culture. It had become a deliberate and active act of subversion. Through the appropriation of the practice, through its consumption in the mainstream its subversive potential has been neutralized. The transgression is no longer a transgression. Tattooing has become almost ubiquitous and thus, the practice cannot be considered a subversive act by itself anymore.

This process explains the middle-class appropriation of the practice after it had firmly rejected it before to a certain extent. The second aspect important to explain the middle-class appropriation of tattooing is the transformation that the practice had to undergo in order to be embraced by the middle class. The bourgeoisification of tattooing could only happen on the basis of a series of alterations and modifications of the practice that can be summarized as a whole process of professionalization. It involved a significant improvement of hygienic and sanitary standards, the qualification of the tattooist and the artistic pretension of the practice. All those alterations helped first of all, to disassociate tattooing from its old image, to substitute the grotesquely tattooed working-class body with a more refined, a nicely decorated, still elegant middle-class body, and to create social distance. Secondly, it re-established the disciplinary code within the tattoo community, that is to say tattooing had to be transformed in a way that would comply with the disciplinary code of the bio-politics to be accepted and practiced in the middle class. Thus, the risk of contagion and inflammation had to be credibly reduced and the newly required qualification of the tattooist serves the double function of both ensuring a minimal “harm” of the body and investing tattooing with a whole new sophisticated appearance and meaning - as opposed to its initial association with mental illness and deficiencies. According to this transformation of tattooing to a more compliant form with the body politics, we can say that bodies inscribed that way can still be considered disciplined bodies.

The last remaining question that has been directive for this thesis is whether against the theoretical background of the inscription of bodies there is the possibility of a

counterinscription. The development of tattooing, its investment with the semiological meaning of deviance, the consequent middle-class abstinence on the one hand, and the working-class endorsement of tattooing on the other, illustrates very well how an individual's subjectivity and relation towards his or her own body are constituted by surrounding power relations and the related factor of class affiliation. It is exemplary for how much power and subjectivity are interrelated and how thoroughly our political, social, economic and cultural circumstances is "inscribed" on us. Thus, the question: is a counterinscription possible? The history of tattooing in the West has shown that it is, and moreover, that one even can consider the development of tattooing towards a practice of resistance has been fostered by the domination of the middle class and its rejection of tattooing as a deviant practice. When tattooing was practiced despite the stigma and the social exclusion it entailed, when it was practiced although being aware of the consequences, the tattoo gained the semiological meaning of resistance. It is in our Western societies, where there is the operation of a political technology of the body, where the body is invested with a certain value but therefore as well subject to a constant surveillance, control, examination and evaluation, that the body could turn into a site of subversion. There are numerous examples of tattooing being performed as a means of reclaiming control over one's body, withdrawing from the dominant culture and its disciplining structure and overwriting the externally imposed inscriptions. I have shown several cases of individuals or entire groups experiencing suppression and alienation and then discovering tattooing for (at least symbolically) overcoming it. Where there is a state of domination and where this domination is in any way related to the body and objectifying it, one can find examples of tattooing being exercised with exactly this purpose of undermining the domination and overcome the alienation. This is when an individual develops agency, takes action and performs tattooing as an act of subversion. This is when tattooing can be considered a counterinscription: a deliberate rewriting of the external inscription of bodies.

We have also seen that after the middle-class had appropriated the practice of tattooing and thus, its subversive potential had been dissolved in the consumerism of late capitalism, members of other social classes did not cease to tattoo. When the middle-class started to participate and as a new elite soon claimed cultural control over the practice, this newly installed upper-class domination within the community just provoked new forms of transgressions, as power is destined to foster resistance. The consequence is a perpetual struggle. Thus, when observing the contemporary tattoo community one will witness a

significant and constantly increasing fragmentation of the tattoo community and struggle over the culture of the practice. We have also seen how tattooists and tattoo fans make efforts to find new expressions in tattooing that go beyond mainstream aesthetic and practical conventions that will manifest themselves in the persistent development of new styles and ways of exercising tattooing in the attempt of a stylistic and practical restoration of the subversive and rebellious potential of tattooing after the practice itself has long been appropriated by the dominant culture.

Finally, I have considered the possibility of understanding tattooing in its function for the individual as a technology of the self. I have argued that in our cultural context tattooing can serve as a technology of the self based on two of its characteristics as a self-forming practice. First of all, it complies with the function of constituting the wearer's identity, of creating him or herself. As an act of an individual constituting him or herself as a subject outside the disciplinary code, developing agency and reclaiming control, tattooing serves as a practice of freedom and as such the second aspect that can qualify as a technology of the self. When an individual in a disciplinary society under the regime of the biopolitics gets a tattoo, it exercises its freedom and constitutes itself as a subject independently from the norms and the disciplinary code of the society he lives in. He thereby affirms his autonomy against domination, his freedom against coercion and assumes control of his own identity and subjectivity. Thus, it limits power. The exercise of tattooing against the socio-political context of our contemporary Western societies has not only served as a self-forming activity for the individuals alone, it also has, by subverting and questioning the disciplinary and aesthetic code, ultimately loosened it. Therefore, we can consider tattooing a practice of freedom that contests and limits disciplinary power.

Altogether we have seen, how in the course of history since its rediscovery tattooing has served various social functions and has been invested with a series of different semiological meanings: from the mark of the exotic, the deviant, of resistance towards a fashionable trend of self-formation and adornment. It has become clear that this entire development is far from being a random course of events. On the contrary, the confrontation of the recent history of tattooing in the modern Western societies with the underlying relations of power has shown that there is a close link between them. It is the very specific form of power operating in our Western societies that controls and directs its subjects' conduct very subtly and almost without being perceived that we have to consider the driving

force. It is due to this disciplinary power and the directive of the bio-politics that tattooing has been rendered deviant in the first place and that has made legal interventions concerning the practice unneeded. It is an enormously subtle application of power, through a process of normalization, but it is exemplary for how power is exercised in disciplinary societies and it necessarily has fostered its resistance. The history of tattooing in the West since its rediscovery is not simply an evolution of the practice gradually going through different stages of social interpretation, purpose and acceptance. It has to be considered a process in which the perpetual struggle of power and resistance manifests itself. Only against the background of this very specific interplay of the relations of power in our modern Western societies, tattooing could ever serve the range of functions that it has fulfilled between the poles of discipline and deviance.

Moreover, we have seen how deviance serves the determination of a norm and ultimately the control and coercion of a certain desired behaviour, thus a disciplinary mechanism. Therefore, deviance can be considered an indicator for discipline as a more concrete manifestation of the interrelation between resistance and power. Discipline and deviance are just as much intertwined and not opposing, but constituting each other. As I tried to show, it is under this notion that we have to comprehend the history of tattooing in the West.

Nevertheless, I have also argued that within this intricate interplay that manifests itself on all levels of the social bodies, there is the possibility of an individual developing agency, taking action and practicing its freedom - also in the case of tattooing even though it might seem that the practice has become a plaything in a structural struggle between power and resistance. I have shown, how tattooing as a self-forming activity and exercise of freedom can be considered a technology of the self. I believe that after having established a profound insight in how tattooing has developed in the Western societies in thorough relation with the socio-political context and the underlying relations of power as a practice between discipline and deviance, the self deserves a more elaborate interest and contemplation in this whole matter.

As I have argued, under Foucault's notion of the aesthetics of existence, the artistic moment in tattooing shifts from the tattooist to the person who is getting tattooed, to the bearer. I believe in this presumption lies an appalling and highly interesting subject for further (philosophical) contemplation. Tattooing has long made its way into galleries,

museums and art magazines. The practice has been reinvented by acteurs from the fine arts and invested with a whole new artistic pretense. Yet, tattooing as an art is very much contested. As I have shown, in the middle-class and mainstream form of tattooing one can find the central notion of the tattooist as an artist, whose technical skills in drawing, creating imagery and tattooing qualify him or her as such. Thus, the bearer is rather understood as a collector of pieces on his or her skin. Even though custom design is very common in tattooing, the creative activity is assumed in the person of the tattooist. If considering tattooing as a technology of the self and taking into account the Foucauldian notion of the aesthetics of existence in this context, the bearer and his or her self gains a whole new importance. The creative activity is no longer to be assumed in the technically skilled execution of tattooing, but in the self-forming moment and interpretational performance of the bearer. As indicated, tattooing as an art form is highly controversial and largely discussed not only within the tattoo community, but in literature as well. All those accounts center around the person of the tattooist though. I believe, motivated by the findings of this thesis, that the debate has to open up and take into account the self of the bearer as an element to be considered.

Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that acknowledging the self of the bearer as a site of creative activity in the practice of tattooing, it should not be considered an exclusive and ultimate determination of the bearer as the artist in tattooing. Acknowledging the self of the bearer does not necessarily entail the elimination of the possibility of tattooing as a creative act that is located in the performance of the tattooist. On the contrary, I believe that generally, when discussing the artistic potential of tattooing it is necessary to go beyond the conventional stances on the topic. If the debate simply remains going around the question whether tattooing can comply with the characteristics that we consider to define fine art, it misses a whole series of possibilities - not only of a creative activity in tattooing where one initially would not suspect it, but also the possibility of tattooing as an actual medium. The British artist duo BC System (Jack Brindley and Lucas Clayton) has during a residency in 2013 put forward numerous ideas of where public art belongs and that challenged our conventional notions of publicity and how to reach or even create an audience. On November 5th that same year they realized one of the ideas: to design and gift a series of tattoos of the word 'forever'.²⁰² This approach of entirely rethinking the public and considering tattooing as

²⁰² Cf. <http://www.situations.org.uk/projects/bc-system-tattoo-new-works-forever-2013/>.

a medium way beyond its common comprehension is not only innovative, I believe it is also extremely appealing considering the context of our contemporary societies. Due to the ever-advancing information technology, one can theoretically access any kind of information and create publics cutting across any kind of divisions, whether national borders, social differences etc. But at the same time, both the information and the created publics have become highly manipulable. Contemporary communication functions increasingly beyond our comprehension. Regarding this very background I consider tattooing an appealing medium in order to question not only where public art belongs, but also what kinds of publics do we want to create or address in the first place, how should access and visibility be organized, and where and how do we want dialogue to take place? The return to the body, a site of inscription of power and class, but also resistance as a possible alternative of recreating privacy and authenticity in communication.

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