

# Body politics in Foucault and Zhuangzi

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## Abstract

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes how, in the Western modern world, different institutions, such as schools and prisons, discipline human bodies to produce obedient and productive individuals. In doing so, Foucault analyzes the deployment of a new form of political economy of the body in the modern world: the disciplinary society. As Foucault explains his book, in this form of society, “the disciplines became general formulas of domination”, a way to control and dominate individuals by acting on their bodies. The goal of this paper is not to compare Foucault’s work with the *Zhuangzi*, but to use this notion of political economy of the body to approach and understand important aspects of this text. I argue that the *Zhuangzi* analyzes, in several passages, the emergence of another form of political economy of the body during the Warring States period. In particular, the *Zhuangzi* describes two aspects of this political economy of the body. On one hand, the *Zhuangzi* denounces the mass exploitation of human bodies for the constitution of large armies and the construction of great projects, such as defensive walls or canals. This aspect of the political economy of the body is essentially focused on the usefulness of humans bodies for the strengthening of the state. On the other hand, the *Zhuangzi* analyzes the relationship between the practice of amputation as a punishment and the ritualization of the body, showing how these practices of body transformation enclose individuals in specific positions in the social hierarchy. These practices correspond to political technologies of the body used to maintain social order. In this context, the *Zhuangzi* shows the advantage of having a useless and formless body, as it emancipates individuals from the mass exploitation of the human bodies and the domination of social hierarchy.