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The *dispositif* is alive! Recovering social agents in Foucauldian analysis

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Abstract

Michel Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* is increasingly salient in sociological scholarship. We identify and criticise an 'anonymous' emphasis in this scholarship, which often presents the *dispositif* as an anonymous network that acts without human agents. To remedy this tendency we develop an agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* for sociological research. Turning to Foucault's work from the 1970s, we recover descriptions of how social groups act as instigators of *dispositifs* through their invention of tactics and techniques. We develop these into an agent-inclusive version of dispositional analytics and suggest five steps to pursue in empirical analysis. We exemplify these steps through a historical case of protesting. Finally, we show how our revisionist version of the *dispositif* meets critiques of Foucault's agentless approach and discuss the implication for a further integration of sociological research with dispositional analytics.

KEYWORDS

agency, discipline, Foucault, protesting, security, the *dispositif*

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Foucault's notion of the *dispositif* is increasingly popular in sociological research. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose praise the *dispositif* as 'one of the most powerful conceptual tools introduced by Foucault' (Rabinow & Rose, 2003, p. xv), noting that while conventional social theory relies on institutions, classes, and ideologies, the *dispositif* traces mobile relations that cut across them. It does so by foregrounding a prescriptive dimension in social practices, helping us study how problems emerge and become objects of intervention. In outline, the *dispositif* denotes a set of practices and techniques invested with a strategy. This transversal analysis, which detects a propensity across social practices (e.g., for disciplinary normalisation), is the key contribution of dispositional analytics. It is also an analytical orientation that can and should be pursued through a further cross-pollination with the sociological tradition.

In recent years, the *dispositif* has been used to study issues like sustainability standards (Silva-Castañeda & Trussart, 2016), whistle-blowing practices (du Plessis, 2020), quality improvement in education (Hautz & Thoma, 2021), cannabis legalisation (Wagner et al., 2021), global business logistics (Fleming et al., 2022), the regulation of contention (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2023), and pension fund divestments (Himick, 2023). A common thread in these studies is that the *dispositif* is rendered anonymous, which means that the *dispositif* acts rather than human agents. This anonymous rendering is not a misinterpretation of Foucault's concept, since this anonymity does figure in Foucault. However, it hinders an integration of dispositional analytics with core sociological studies of agency and change. Fligstein and McAdam (2011, pp. 6–7) note that 'it is hard to be a participant in social life without being impressed at how individuals and groups are able to affect what happens to them'. As they conclude, the marginalisation of agents 'puts sociologists in an awkward position, intellectually and politically'.

However, this hindrance is not impassable. There are resources in Foucault's work that include situated agents. Drawing on these resources, we develop an agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif*. This version enriches both sociological studies of agency and change and counters an anonymous tendency within dispositional analytics. For instance, it helps trace how propensities for disciplinary normalisation emerge in both radical social movements and state agencies. That is, it helps us study how problems such as protesting are rendered visible and become objects of intervention across otherwise distinct institutions and movements. At the same time, the agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* does not trap these institutions and movements in an anonymous structure. Instead, we insist that agency runs throughout the emergence and operation of *dispositifs*. To be clear, this revisionist move does not recover unified subjects. Rather, we show how agents, who may be internally divided and set against themselves (Foucault, 1984, p. 88), can be included in dispositional analytics.

We proceed in four parts. First, we outline the anonymous rendering of the *dispositif* among Foucault's interpreters and sketch three analytical limitations of this rendering. Second, we recover intimations of an 'agent-inclusive' version of the *dispositif* in Foucault, using these to develop guidelines for dispositional analytics within sociology. Third, we exemplify these guidelines through the case of protesting. Finally, we discuss some implications of the agent-inclusive framework for integrating the *dispositif* within sociology.

2 | THE 'ANONYMOUS' INTERPRETATION OF THE *DISPOSITIF*

Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* can be understood as a cluster of practices and techniques that are invested with a strategy (Collier, 2009; Raffnsøe et al., 2016; Villadsen, 2021). For example, the disciplinary *dispositif* connects practices and techniques for improving, surveying, comparing, and sanctioning bodies (Foucault, 1995). These practices and techniques carry a strategy of normalisation, which aims to align individuals with norms in learning, working, military training, and more. The concept of the *dispositif* connects such practices and techniques with the production of knowledge, which creates new fields of visibility. Hence, the disciplinary *dispositif* intersected with new knowledge of deviance developed by the rising psy-disciplines that made individuals visible

as 'cases' and 'types', such as *homo criminalis*. Similarly, the *dispositif* of sexuality intersected with knowledge produced by medicine, psychiatry, and psychology, especially concerning children's sexuality and women's physiology.

Foucault's work and that of his inheritors often display what we term an anonymous version of the *dispositif*. This version is already anticipated in *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault describes discipline as a heterogeneous system of instruments, techniques, and procedures:

Discipline may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a "physics" or an "anatomy" of power, a technology.

(Foucault, 1995, p. 215)

This quote illustrates how Foucault often describes discipline as a 'system' or 'network' of techniques that expanded through the social field, imbuing it with a particular mode of knowing and exercising power. Disciplinary techniques, such as examinations, and disciplinary knowledge, such as psychology, lend themselves for use in schools, hospitals, and prisons, but discipline is not reducible to institutions. The disciplinary *dispositif* traverses institutions, lending to them a strategy of normalisation practised by doctors, psychologists, teachers, social workers, and industrialists.

We stress that these 'systems' are never ready-made. Foucault often shows how *dispositifs* are formed by agents responding to pressing problems through local tactics, which gradually link up into broader strategies. In this process, however, these instigating agents are soon forgotten, and the strategy becomes anonymous. Analysing discipline, Foucault's describes a movement from early industrialists, who invented techniques of moralising, surveying, and controlling of workers, to the rise of mandatory schooling, generalised health care, crime prevention, and more. Disciplinary normalisation thus expanded from being the concern of distinct groups to a general social concern. Foucault notes that 'you get a coherent, rational strategy, but one for which it is no longer possible to identify a person who conceived it' (1980a, p. 203). Indeed, these anonymous strategies display 'intentionality without a subject, a strategy without a strategist' (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 187).

When Foucault speaks of strategy, he does not refer to an agent or a class that acts purposely to achieve particular goals. A strategy is not the coherent result of actors' wilful efforts but denotes a field of intersecting tactics, procedures and techniques that evolve in and through their interactions. Although the effects of a strategy are heterogenous, its components are intentional and form a discernible rationality, which can be analysed. This attempt to speak both of agents' intentional tactics and of anonymous strategies was part of Foucault's genealogical break with his archaeological assumption of self-sustaining discursive structures. We suggest, however, that scholarship on the *dispositif* has largely forgotten the original agents, leaning too heavily into the anonymity of strategies. To demonstrate this point, we briefly discuss some of the most influential scholarship on Foucault's *dispositif*.

One anonymous reading of the *dispositif* links the concept to machines and an organism's self-sustaining processes. Matteo Pasquinelli (2015) traces the *dispositif* back to Georges Canguilhem and his 1952 essay 'Machines and Organism' (2008). Pasquinelli suggests that it is due to Foucault's reading of Canguilhem that the *dispositif* resembles anonymous organic processes and mechanistic functions. Canguilhem developed his argument through a reading of Descartes on the transformation of power: 'According to Descartes, a mechanical device that executes replaces a power that directs and commands' (Canguilhem, 2008, p. 87). Canguilhem used the *dispositif* to describe an impersonal, automated power that replaces the personalised power of a sovereign (Pasquinelli, 2015, p. 84). Hence, even before Foucault introduced his *dispositif*, the term relied on an understanding of power as impersonal, technical, and immanent to an assemblage of elements.

The impersonal rendering of the *dispositif* was radicalised by Gilles Deleuze's reading of Foucault, which became so influential that the term arguably has developed somewhere in between Deleuze and Foucault (Dean &

Villadsen, 2016, p. 116). Deleuze (1988) shares with Foucault the basic premise that the *dispositif* does not simply represent the world. And, like Foucault, Deleuze emphasises that the *dispositif* operates in multiple dimensions, creating, in Deleuze's terms, lines of visibility, enunciation, force, and subjectification. Deleuze's most distinct contribution is his attention to visualisation, his 'lines of visibility' (1992), whereby the *dispositif* directs the gaze by 'throwing light upon objects', making them 'shimmer' under a particular normativity (1988, p. 52). For instance, the disciplinary *dispositif* makes the world visible through the division of normal/abnormal that calls for normalising interventions. Importantly, Deleuze's reading of the *dispositif* very rarely speaks of agents. Rather, the *dispositif* is a condition of actions, which interconnects 'the visible and the articulable' (1988, p. 32).

Deleuze's *dispositif* evinces his philosophical emphasis on the world's immanent creativity, which is far removed from a sociological concern with agents. As Peter Hallward notes, Deleuze's philosophy contrasts with Foucault's specific genealogies of institutionalised power-knowledge (Hallward, 2006, p. 161). Unlike Foucault, Deleuze's thinking moves 'towards a contemplative and immaterial abstraction' that neglects the constraints of this world (Hallward, 2006, p. 7). Deleuze's articulation of the *dispositif* recasts power and knowledge relations as always-already creative like the world itself.

Recent scholarship on the *dispositif* has emphasised multiplicity and complexity (Collier, 2009; Raffnsøe et al., 2016; Villadsen, 2021), often portraying multiple *dispositifs* that interact, not human agents. The key source for this stress on complexity is Foucault's 1978 lectures, *Security, Territory, Population*. There, Foucault sees the social field as pervaded by several *dispositifs* that reinforce, negate, or appropriate elements from one another. Whereas *Discipline and Punish* and related works foreground 'the internal' workings of the disciplinary *dispositif* (its innovators, micro-techniques, and proliferation), the 1978 lectures trace the 'external' relations between various *dispositifs* (their mutual support, opposition, and exchange of elements). Hence, Foucault presents us with a gamut, where legal, disciplinary, and security *dispositifs* interact, each operating distinct strategies. This emphasis on complexity and dynamic interplay of *dispositifs* holds great analytical value for studying thorny socio-political issues, including how to regulate economic crises, handle pandemics, or respond to mass migration. However, it risks solidifying the 'anonymous' version of the *dispositif*.

While the *dispositif* carries several analytical benefits, the problem with the anonymous version of the *dispositif* is its vulnerability to longstanding critiques of Foucault's analysis of power and the subject. This issue is especially pertinent to a further integration of dispositional analytics with sociological traditions concerned with agency and change. The critiques concern three ways of marginalising agents that restrict a fuller exploitation of the *dispositif*'s analytical utility within contemporary sociology.

First, the anonymous reading risks reducing the social world to self-sustaining forces with a complex life of their own (e.g., Connolly, 2011). The *dispositif* portrays a social world that is so transient that agents and the institutional structures in which they act become difficult to articulate. For example, viewing the state as a transient field, pervaded by multiple *dispositifs*, risks neglecting the state's sovereign, legal, and redistributive powers (Dean & Villadsen, 2016). Instead of state authorities and conventional political actors, we find *dispositifs* that appear as nebulous 'actors', engaging in mobile alliances and conflicts.

Second, a longstanding critique of Foucault is that he renders social actors passive in relation to dominating structures of power (Alexander, 2006, p. 20; Illouz, 2008, p. 4). Nick Fox sees this problem as twofold, noting that while Foucault's authorship before 1980 entailed a determinism of the subject, his 1980s 'notion of the "self" moves to the other extreme, inadequately addressing the constraints which affect the fabrication of subjectivity' (1998, p. 415). Insofar as the *dispositif* becomes anonymous, it risks marginalising analyses of social change spurred by agents.

Third, the anonymous version of the *dispositif* risks undermining its critical potential. Fredric Jameson (1991) argued that Foucault conveys a resigned and fatalistic view of power that undermines the capacity for political action in the reader. Indeed, if social agents are 'mechanically punched out by power', Jürgen Habermas (1990, p. 293) declared, it is unclear what critical role sociological analyses can play.

In brief, the anonymous reading of the *dispositif* lends itself to three conventional sociological critiques of Foucauldian scholarship regarding his portrayal of power as self-propelling, dominating, and producing effects of resignation. To be clear, these are at best partial interpretations of Foucault's overall authorship (Heller, 1996) and of the *dispositif* in particular. We merely recapitulate them to indicate certain risks within the anonymous rendering of the *dispositif*. That is, while these enduring sociological critiques may not do full justice to Foucault theoretically, they point to an analytical lacunae within studies of *dispositifs*. We confront this problem by providing an alternative reading of the *dispositif* and by developing an analytical framework that can take agents into account.

3 | FOUCAULT'S AGENT-INCLUSIVE VERSION OF THE DISPOSITIF

Our agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* begins with the question of how *dispositifs* emerge. When we closely read Foucault's work from the 1970s, the emergence of a *dispositif* does not happen through an anonymous assembling of elements. It is almost always driven by tactics that social groups put to work for tackling pressing problems. The study of *dispositifs* must begin where these tactics and their elaboration can be observed. Tactics, says Foucault, 'were invented and organised from the starting points of local conditions and particular needs. They took shape in piecemeal fashion, prior to any class strategy designed to weld them into vast, coherent ensembles' (1980b, p. 159).

Elaborating on this emergence, Foucault notes that the *dispositif* is 'a formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need' (1980a, p. 195). 'Urgent need' does not imply a sociological functionalism. It can be sudden threats to society as a whole, such as the plague in mid-14th century Europe, or challenges represented by the idle to the early capitalist economy. It can also be the need felt by particular groups, as exemplified by 18th century merchants' need to protect moveable goods against theft or industrialists' need to fix workers to the productive apparatus.

Illustrating such urgent needs, Foucault discusses worker resistance against wage-labour in the 18th and 19th century: 'There were huge and sometimes collective refusals of Monday work, circuits of nomadism organised according to labour markets, tavern societies, spontaneous forms of organisation of the working class' (2015, p. 191). He shows how industrialists developed tactics to suppress and discipline workers. Foregrounding the needs and tactics of situated agents, Foucault describes the invention of punitive and moralising techniques, which begin to form the disciplinary *dispositif*. It was, he says, 'necessarily highly complex' and 'multiple in its points of application', since it had to ensure three goals: 'protection of the productive apparatus; repression of illegalism; the moral equipping of the proletariat' (2015, p. 174). On Foucault's account, 'urgent needs' are therefore often the needs of social agents engaged in specific struggles.

However, this 'civil war model' (e.g., Foucault, 2015, pp. 24–25) is not an exclusive framework for dispositional analytics. In some cases, *dispositifs* emerge as agents respond to urgent needs that are not tied to struggles but pose sudden threats to society as a whole, such as the plague in mid 14th century Europe, 17th and 18th century discussions of how to secure grain supply in French cities, or the medical campaigns against smallpox in 18th century Europe. These campaigns aimed to slow epidemics by using techniques, first of variolization, then of vaccination, that anticipated modern programmes of mass immunisation (Foucault, 2007, pp. 58–59). While *dispositifs* do not necessarily arise from struggles, there are always agents who respond to pressing problems by readapting existing techniques and forms of knowledge or by creating new ones.

However, while Foucault stresses the work of situated agents in the early formation of the *dispositif*, these tend to disappear as tactics solidify into strategies, as noted above. The original agents are not only forgotten as the *dispositif* is elaborated in a new context. The analysis itself marginalises agents as the *dispositif* becomes anonymous. Our approach resists this tendency by emphasising the continual role of agents after the emergence of *dispositifs*.

Who are these agents? In Foucault's work, they are often presented as classes. However, this does not mean that the agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* adopts a conventional Marxism. The emergence of the disciplinary

dispositif cannot be derived from modern capitalism and its 'needs'. While Foucault speaks of classes, these are not fixed entities. Instead, Foucault emphasises that classes can arise from the deployment of tactics in struggles. In Foucault's lecture series *The Punitive Society*, the innovators of micro-disciplinary techniques, such as merchant guilds, philanthropic associations, and societies for the correction of manners, are not pervaded by a uniform class ideology (2015, pp. 105–106). Central to the emergence of *dispositifs* is not classes but situated and shifting groups who often, but not always, engage in specific struggles. Although adopting a Marxist perspective, Jacques Bidet (2016) helps elaborate this point. Bidet emphasises Foucault's attention to social struggle in the 1970s: 'Foucault arranges the battlefield by defining as primary the moment of the particular, construed in terms of "tactic", and as secondary the overall movement, conceived in terms of strategy' (Bidet, 2016, p. 156). Hence, situated agents play their part in utilising and reinserting their tactics into strategies.

Consider also Foucault's account of the *dispositif* of sexuality in *History of Sexuality Volume One*. Here, he identifies the bourgeoisie as its initial instigators (Foucault, 1979, p. 120). In the latter half of the 18th century, the bourgeoisie sought to distinguish themselves by constructing a 'sexualized' class body: 'This class must be seen rather as being occupied, from the mid-eighteenth century on, with creating its own sexuality and forming a specific body based on it, a "class" body with its health, hygiene, descent, and race' (Foucault, 1979, p. 124). Once again, this explanation cannot be neatly fitted into a Marxist account. Foucault notes that 'the most rigorous techniques were formed and, more particularly, applied first, with the greatest intensity, in the economically privileged and politically dominant classes' (1979, p. 120). Here, Foucault comes closer to a Bourdieusian account of class than a Marxist one (e.g., Bourdieu, 1987). This does not mean that the agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* must be conceived as a field analysis à la Bourdieu. Rather, the agent-inclusive version remains open to several ways of understanding situated agents and the urgent needs to which they respond. It can be taken up and adapted by diverse sociological approaches. We now turn to how this can be done, and further discuss what an agent is in dispositional analytics.

4 | A FIVE-STAGE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In themselves, the above intimations in Foucault's work provide little guidance on how to reinsert agents and their struggles into dispositional analytics. This lack of guidance has probably contributed to the marginalisation of agents in dispositional analytics, although there is theoretical room for them. We therefore develop Foucault's intimations into a five-stage analytical framework. Here, we draw on Foucault as well as Bidet (2016, p. 140), who synthesises a similar procedure from the case of discipline. For Bidet, the analysis begins with tactics without a central point. Moving from these, one arrives at a generalised *dispositif*, which arises from the integration of specific tactics and techniques. This account, notes Bidet, follows a somewhat artificial chronological schema of 'before' and 'after'. It is an important qualification, since genealogical work often oscillates back and forth between the steps assumed by such chronology. The schema creates heuristic guidelines for the analysis of *dispositifs*. We do not argue that Foucault's own work always followed this list or that analyses of *dispositifs* should rigorously proceed through all the steps (the schema is adapted from Villadsen, 2024, pp. 296–297).

1. Identify the *emergence* of similar techniques and practises across social domains. This step also involves scrutinising the concerns and reasoning that were articulated by the agents responsible for inventing these techniques.
2. Reconstruct a *strategic imperative*, which first emerged in response to an urgent problem but gradually began to lend itself to problem-solving more broadly.
3. Describe how similar techniques are integrated into *diverse institutions* and begin to alter them. This step can describe both similarity and variation across contexts. It can include analyses of how agents such as professionals in institutions adapt, modify, or redirect techniques.

4. Trace how the *dispositif* established in steps 1–3 gradually *transforms* under the influence of critique, resistance, and refinements. This step includes identifying the agents who critiqued, resisted, or refined elements of the *dispositif*.
5. Recover how the *dispositif* might fail to accommodate challenges and disruptions, including agents' needs, thereby losing ground or becoming infiltrated by another *dispositif*.

These guidelines focus on a single *dispositif*. However, they also accommodate the interplay of several *dispositifs* and the ways that situated agents operate in this interplay. Hence, we maintain the interplay, emphasised in recent 'anonymous' interpretations, while insisting on agents' irreducible and identifiable work. We stress that the *dispositif* is not a unity or a structure but a propensity in the social body, for example, the propensity for normalisation. The *dispositif* is in perpetual motion, contracting or expanding through the tactics agents deploy in responding to pressing problems.

In incorporating agents throughout the five analytical steps, we do not ground dispositional analytics in a theory of self-coherent and enclosed subjects. We put forward an agent-inclusive as opposed to an agent-centric version of the *dispositif*. Hence, we appreciate that Foucault, in the 1970s, decentred the subject with inspiration from Nietzsche, describing it as a site of struggle between diverse, conflicting forces (Foucault, 1984). For Nietzsche (1994, p. 26), our language tricks us into naming a 'doer' as the one responsible for statements and actions, but the actions assigned to a subject are in fact part of multi-layered processes of dispersed forces. Nevertheless, in the same period in which Foucault embraced this decentring of the subject, agents such as the French bourgeoisie, early psychiatrists, and 19th century prison reformers often figured in his analyses of *dispositifs*. We take our revisionist lead from these particular places in Foucault's authorship, aspiring to include agents more explicitly than the literature on the *dispositif* has so far done, without hereby reinserting the constitutive subject from which Foucault wanted to escape.

Our agent-inclusive version includes agents who relate to *dispositifs*, embracing, negotiating, or practising counter-conducts in relation to it. They are integral to the emergence, expansion, and transformation of *dispositifs*. Their inclusion, however, requires only a minimal or 'thin' conception of the human agent. Hence, we can follow Deleuze (1992) and Rose (1996, p. 142) by seeing the interiority of agents as an 'infolding of exteriority'. That is, there is no initial or pristine interiority. Instead of such an interiority, we can speak of folds that 'incorporate without totalising, internalise without unifying, collect together discontinuously in the form of pleats making surfaces, spaces, flows and relations' (Rose, 1996, p. 143). At the same time, even Deleuze (1992, p. 164), who clearly decentres the subject, insists that although 'we belong to social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] and act within them', one must grant irreducibility to agents. This is because agents never achieve unification, constituting instead points of differentiation, intensification and reversal.

The agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* does not bring with it any strong assumptions about the nature of human agents. Our approach is thus compatible with social theorising, which has radically decentred the subject. We stress, however, that our approach is not necessarily married to a Deleuzian conception of infolding, even if this 'thin' version of the subject does align well with dispositional analytics. Our framework travels light, lending itself to a conception of folding but also, as we suggest in the conclusion, to more conventional sociological approaches within field theory or cultural sociology.

5 | EXPLORING THE AGENT-INCLUSIVE APPROACH

Concepts like the *dispositif* do not operate in the abstract. Rather, they form an analytical grid that 'brings a field of inquiry into view' (Koopman & Matza, 2013, p. 822). In order to demonstrate how our agent-inclusive approach shapes this field of inquiry, we turn to the case of how protesting is practised and disorder prevented. The case of protesting is fruitful for two reasons. First, it shows how the agent-inclusive approach allows dispositional analytics

to travel beyond classical Foucauldian themes. Social movement studies tend to view Foucauldian approaches with scepticism (Baumgarten & Ullrich, 2016). This is arguably due to the anonymous reading of the *dispositif*. If *dispositifs* act over the heads of protesters, they have little to offer a sociological tradition that asks how agents bring about change (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). Second, the case clarifies our relation to two positions on agents, which have characterised the few applications of Foucault within social movement studies. There has been an adoption of the anonymous account in studies of how *dispositifs* regulate crowds (e.g., Baumgarten & Ullrich, 2016; Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2023). A different application centres on agents but sees them as engaged in counter-conducts that subvert *dispositifs* by challenging the knowledge involved in governing (e.g., Beckett et al., 2017; Death, 2010). In contrast, our agent-inclusive approach insists that agents are everywhere, not just among protesters engaged in counter-conducts. Furthermore, many protesters do not engage in counter-conducts but in the elaboration of *dispositifs*.

We illustrate these points by outlining the emergence and development of a disciplinary *dispositif* within practices of protesting in the United Kingdom and England in particular. This constellation emerged in the late 18th century within the parliamentary reform movement, was elaborated after the Napoleonic Wars, became slowly integrated into the state through protest policing strategies, and faces a series of challenges, exemplified by a hostile Conservative government. This is far from an exhaustive historical analysis. We only seek to show how the agent-inclusive approach opens a new analytical front within sociology. Furthermore, we draw less on primary sources and more on secondary literature, often from non-Foucauldian perspectives (e.g., Davis, 2015; Thompson, 1992; Tilly, 1995). We thereby seek to ensure that our reading can travel beyond the Foucauldian tradition (see Møller & Skaaning, 2021). The case follows the five analytical steps laid out above.

1. The emergence of techniques

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of a wide range of disciplinary techniques across social domains (Foucault, 1995). Moral and religious reform movements, motivated by Anglican understandings of political virtue, sought to reshape the dispositions of individuals (Burt, 2006; Hunt, 1999). Social and urban policy makers became increasingly concerned with disciplining the poor, driven by an anxiety about urban crime, idleness, and riots. Innovations such as the widespread construction of workhouses, city lighting and house numbering sought to create orderly and productive individuals (Dodsworth, 2019, p. 179; Innes, 2009, p. 171). Likewise, the police reform movement, led by figures such as Henry Fielding and, later, Patrick Colquhoun, began to develop forms of organisation to prevent the moral corruption of the lower orders (Dodsworth, 2019). Situated agents' innovative efforts to produce virtuous, orderly, and productive citizens are amply documented. What we stress here is that they form the context in which protesting became visible through a new disciplinary imperative.

2. A new strategic imperative

This imperative did not automatically move into protesting. Rather, protesters developed it as part of their struggle. We see this in the parliamentary reform movement for manhood suffrage and annual parliaments. Protesters in the movement were among the first to deploy the tactic of large and orderly public meetings, making them 'paragons of how radicals could seek to harness the power of crowds' (Davis, 2015, p. 156). In doing so, they developed an imperative that made protesting visible as an orderly practice that could manifest the truth of public opinion, insofar as it did not descend into disorder (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2023). This imperative broke with the tradition of protesting as 'dialogues of disorder' (Randall, 2006) in which protesting was not disciplined through this sharp boundary to disorder (see Thompson, 1992; Tilly, 1995).

Our framework sees this break as a response to an urgent need faced by situated agents. In this case, protesters in the 1790s faced the challenge of how they could mobilise the lower orders without a repressive response from political elites. These elites were increasingly intolerant of traditional forms of disorder (Navickas, 2016)

because of both structural changes in the state and market (Thompson, 1992; Tilly, 1995) as well as the 1780 Gordon Riots in London and the 1789 French Revolution (Rogers, 1998, p. 171).

To meet this need, parliamentary reformers developed a form of discipline, which sought to create peaceful protesters opposed to rioters. This disciplining found expression in a pamphlet by the London Corresponding Society (LCS), a reform organisation, called 'Reformers not Rioters' (1794). The imperative for peaceful protesting materialised in the practices of the LCS and other reform societies, which sought to order, subdivide, and rearticulate space and time (see Foucault, 1995, p. 162). Contrary to the few applications of Foucault in social movement studies, our approach does not conceptualise these practices as 'counter-conduct' but as adaptations of a disciplinary *dispositif*. Societies established divisions of 30 individuals to manage individual members, preventing them from turning disorderly (Davis, 2008, pp. 26–27). They also instituted a new temporal regulation through standardised meeting times and by limiting how often members could speak during a single question (Davis, 2008, p. 31). Furthermore, reformers sought to prevent excessive eating, drinking, and smoking to teach 'habitual self-constraint' (Davis, 2008, p. 31). The culmination of the disciplinary imperative occurred in the LCS' public meetings where they sought to create and perform their self-discipline, tapping into cultural codes of civility (Davis, 2015, p. 156; see also Alexander, 2006). The agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* helps us understand how agents could tap into and perform these codes through a disciplinary *dispositif*, resulting in new ways of making protesting visible.

The disciplinary imperative was elaborated after the Napoleonic Wars, which put a temporary stop to organised protesting (see Navickas, 2016, p. 6; Tilly, 1995). The re-emergence of protesting drew on experiences from the parliamentary reform movement as well as wartime developments (Poole, 2019, p. 53). This elaboration of a disciplinary imperative also led to changes within the long-established *dispositif* of sovereignty. We discuss each point in turn.

The parliamentary reform movement and the new workers movements slowly gained momentum in the final years of the war and in its aftermath. Like the LCS, they faced the problem of how to organise 'the lower orders' without a repressive response (see Poole, 2019, p. 222). Their solution drew on disciplinary innovations made by the LCS. The 1817 March of the Blanketeers', in which northern reformers sought to petition the king, saw marchers divide themselves into groups of 10, each with a leader carrying a petition to maintain order (Epstein, 1994, p. 15). They divided space to produce non-violent protesters. Likewise, strikers developed a form of disciplined parading in north-west cotton districts in 1818 (Navickas, 2016, p. 146).

The most significant elaboration of disciplined protesting took place shortly before the reform meeting at St. Peter's Field in Manchester in 1819, which ended in the massacre of Peterloo (Poole, 2019). The reform organisation Stockport Union sought to improve the moral education of individuals through day and evening schools (Belchem, 1978, pp. 753–754; Poole, 2019, p. 187). The new theories and techniques of education developed in the Stockport Union would help orient Owenite organisations and the Chartist culture of the 1840s (Navickas, 2016, p. 73). Alongside this moral education, reformers adopted disciplinary techniques such as drilling, conducted by demobilised servicemen, to ensure orderly public meetings (Poole, 2019, p. 378). The reformer Samuel Bamford later remarked that this should demonstrate that reformers 'respected themselves' through a 'display of cleanliness, sobriety, and decorum' (Bamford, 1844, p. 177). This demonstration was central to the public meeting on St Peter's Field, with the reform leader Henry Hunt urging protesters to remain orderly and disciplined (Poole, 2019, p. 264). For example, marchers from Middleton to St. Peter's Field divided into groups of a hundred, each reporting to a leader who, in turn, reported to a principal conductor. At St. Peter's Field, the reformers marched in step, regulating the bodies of protesters in both space and time (Poole, 2019, pp. 273–278). Although the meeting was repressed, the techniques developed by the reform movement were adopted by diverse movements in the 1820s, and propagated by political entrepreneurs (Tilly, 1995, p. 279). They would also become central to the Chartist movement of the late 1830s and 1840s (Navickas, 2016; Scriven, 2017).

The elaboration of the disciplinary imperative by protesters led to changes within a *dispositif* of sovereignty, deployed by the state, local magistrates, and loyalist societies. These faced the urgent need of how to repress disciplined protesters. Before Peterloo, Henry Hobhouse, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Home Office, noted

that 'the peaceable conduct which prevails at the meetings is not the mode in which the English character usually exhibits discontent' (HO 41/4 quoted in Poole, 2019, p. 222). For the political elites, there was something nefarious about this orderly crowd (Navickas, 2016, p. 128; Poole, 2019, p. 231). However, it was not clear how one could prohibit the crowd under existing laws, which forbade seditious libel but not the disciplined public meeting (Lobban, 1990).

Of course, the meeting at St Peter's Field was brutally repressed, but the legal justification for this remained unclear (Poole, 2019, p. 214). A new public order doctrine was therefore elaborated in the subsequent trials, changing how protesting became visible in the framework of sovereign law. Protesting became less a problem of determining the legality of what was said but one of determining whether the protesters' behaviour was a threat (Lobban, 1990). This shift was driven by political elites seeking to repress protesting. It also opened up a field of action. Because it was so vague, political elites could deploy it differently, with Whigs allowing protesters more leeway than Tories (Navickas, 2016, p. 279). In short, the elaboration of a disciplinary *dispositif* by protesters resulted in political elites creating transformations within a sovereign *dispositif*. The agent-inclusive analysis of the *dispositif* thereby ties the elaboration of *dispositifs* to the concrete actions of situated agents.

3. The spread of disciplinary techniques into the state

The disciplinary *dispositif* remained mostly confined to social movements throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century. As John (2023) notes, there was little guidance within the state on how to ensure peaceful protesting before the 1960s.

This situation began to change in 1968, reflecting a move from what protest policing scholars call escalated force to negotiated management (McPhail et al., 1998). We hence notice how a disciplinary *dispositif* moves into state institutions, transforming their techniques of protest control and the knowledge production around protesting. Reacting to the escalation of an anti-war demonstration, a police working party reviewed the public order practices of the Metropolitan Police and of other police forces. They found scant guidance on public order outside colonial riot control, which was deemed inappropriate given the narrative of the restrained 'traditional methods' of British policing (John, 2023, p. 7). The working party was situated within, and partly constrained by, a widespread narrative of policing. It is by including the work of these situated agents that we can understand how a disciplinary *dispositif* moved into state agencies. In a first step to improve protest policing, the Metropolitan Police established a 1-day course on public order, centred on drilling exercises for police officers. These were often oriented by classical crowd theories in which the protesting crowd was on the verge of devolving into rioters (John, 2023, p. 9; see also Reicher et al., 2004). The police's role was mainly to isolate potential troublemakers to prevent escalation into violence. This tactic was further developed through the model of a 'riot curve', which made protesting visible on different stages of escalation and de-escalation, to which the police should react (Waddington & King, 2005, p. 500).

A more radical shift occurred from the 1990s with the introduction of dialogue-oriented practices of protest policing. These practices drew on theories of social identity in which the police could shape the protesting crowd (Reicher et al., 2004). The apogee of these practices is arguably found in a police manual (ACPO, 2010) and a report (HMIC, 2009) motivated by the public uproar over the death of the protester Ian Tomlinson during the G20 summit in 2009 (Gorringer & Rosie, 2013). The shift was not a self-propelling expansion of the *dispositif* but a reaction by an institution facing a legitimacy challenge. As with the original integration of a disciplinary *dispositif* within the state, the process is inseparable from the actions of situated agents. In this approach, the police seek to produce peaceful protesters by obtaining information about the crowd beforehand, facilitating its legal behaviour, negotiating with protesters, and differentiating between individuals in the crowd (see Baker, 2014). This adoption of dialogue-oriented practices is partly an institutionalisation of a disciplinary *dispositif* in the case of protesting, drawing on new psychological knowledge to divide the crowd into individuals who become objects of targeted policing (e.g., ACPO, 2010, p. 107). At the same time, these individuals act within opaque crowd dynamics that must be managed

(e.g., ACPO, 2010, pp. 85–86). Dialogue policing further institutionalises a disciplinary *dispositif* and articulates it with security calculations regarding the protesting crowd (see Foucault, 2007, p. 20).

To be clear, we are not arguing that a disciplinary *dispositif* dominated protest policing practices. It was adopted alongside a militarisation of protest policing, drawing on colonial policing (Jefferson, 1990; John, 2023). However, this period marks an inflection point in which state authorities codified a disciplinary *dispositif* to regulate protesting. The distinction between protesting and rioting, which had arisen in the practices of social movements themselves, came to increasingly orient the state's practices of protest policing. Our agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* ties this shift to the actions of situated agents, who had to navigate the prevailing narratives about policing and legitimacy challenges.

4–5. Transformations and challenges

The agent-inclusive approach stresses that *dispositifs* are never stable but always actualised and transformed by situated agents. We can approach contemporary struggles over the right way to protest within the United Kingdom through this argument. It allows us to understand these struggles as the squeezing of a disciplinary *dispositif* from two sides. There has been a return to techniques of sovereignty within the state and a challenge to disciplined protesting among protesters.

The return to sovereignty is exemplified by the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act of 2022 and changes to the Public Order Act in 2023, although it was foreshadowed in the reaction to the 2011 England Riots (e.g., Lightowlers & Quirk, 2015). These changes give the police wide discretion to stop protesting before any disruption has taken place and criminalises protesters making too much noise, among other measures. It echoes the techniques developed after Peterloo, making protesting visible as a problem of threatening behaviour. This shift to criminalisation is not automatic. Newburn et al. (2018, p. 340) note that the policy reaction to the 2011 England riots was driven by a coalition government reacting defensively to claims for structural socio-economic change. Likewise, the recent changes have been understood as the Conservative government's attempts to repress climate protests (Sheila McKechnie Foundation and Civil Exchange, 2023). For our purposes, the precise explanation is less important than the general logic: the reinvigoration of the sovereign *dispositif* was pushed by situated agents engaged in struggle.

We can sketch a second line of pressure on the disciplinary *dispositif*—this time from protesters sceptical of the effectiveness of the disciplined crowd. Gilmore et al. (2019) show that the police imperative of producing peaceful protesters can be seen by protesters as attempts to ensure police surveillance and control through less repressive measures. This scepticism of disciplinary strategies resonates with calls for more disruptive, even violent, forms of activism, exemplified by discussions within the climate movement (e.g., Malm, 2021).

To be clear, we are not arguing that these lines of pressure are new or that agents can simply undermine the disciplinary *dispositif*. *Dispositifs* emerge from the practices of agents and recursively shape these agents. Disciplinary techniques are at play even within social movements that advocate disruption and resist disciplinary imperatives in protesting. For example, the non-violence training undergone by Extinction Rebellion activists resonates with the drilling exercises of parliamentary reformers in the lead-up to Peterloo (see Fotaki & Forougi, 2022). Protesters can draw on a disciplinary *dispositif* even when resisting it. This is not evidence of an anonymous structure determining protesters but of the mutability of *dispositifs* to agents' situated actions.

6 | CONCLUSION

The case demonstrates how the agent-inclusive approach mitigates the three analytical risks of the anonymous version of the *dispositif*. While these sociological critiques may represent partial readings of Foucault on a theoretical level, we believe that they represent three obstacles to a further integration of the *dispositif* within

sociological analyses. First, including agents throughout the analysis prevents a drift into a transient social world. For example, agents are formed and act within structures of state consolidation, transitions to capitalism, and cultural codes of civility. Second, at no point does the *dispositif* act over the heads of agents. Protesters, political elites, and the police draw on and transform *dispositifs* in specific struggles. This is not a question of protesters engaged in counter-conducts (Beckett et al., 2017; Death, 2010) but of agency suffusing *dispositifs* themselves. Third, the case does not produce a resigned reader. The lines of pressure are sites in which the reader may intervene to shore up or unravel the disciplinary *dispositif*. The analysis clarifies these sites by tying them to a larger history of *dispositifs* and the agents that breathe life into them.

As an analytical approach, the agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* remains grounded within the Foucauldian tradition. It draws our attention to a prescriptive dimension of social practices that traverses classical sociological categories such as institutions, fields, and classes. At the same time, it mitigates the risks associated with this tradition and, specifically, the anonymous version of the *dispositif*. The agent-inclusive version shows how dispositional analytics opens up a new front within a sociological tradition concerned with agency and change. One of the virtues of this version is that it travels light. It assumes that there are agents responding to urgent needs but does not specify the nature of these agents or needs a priori. While it is incompatible with theories of unified subjects (Foucault, 1984, p. 87), it can benefit a broad range of contemporary sociological approaches that also break with such theories. We conclude by briefly sketching two lines of adoption.

There is a strong resonance between Foucault's work on *dispositifs* of sexuality and field theoretical approaches (e.g., Bourdieu, 1987; Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Krause, 2018). Foucault (1979) shows how the *dispositif* of sexuality emerged from tactics first deployed by the bourgeoisie to fortify class distinctions. Without saying so himself, Foucault gestures toward how field theory can contribute to the agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* by fleshing out its conception of situated agents as partly driven by logics of distinction within fields. What the agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* offers, in turn, is a transversal analysis, which traces how a *dispositif* emerges across social fields. For instance, it picks out a level of analysis that allows us to study how forms of visibility move from social movements to the state, as in the case of protesting. Of course, we do not suggest a complete synthesis of Foucault's oeuvre with field theory (for a discussion, see Callewaert, 2006), nor do we argue that the inclusion of situated agents must occur through a field theoretical approach. Rather, we suggest that a cross-pollination between an agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* and field analysis can be of mutual benefit.

The agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* may also benefit more distant traditions. Take the strong program in cultural sociology (Alexander, 2003), which has been hostile to Foucauldian studies of *dispositifs* (Alexander, 2006, p. 20). This hostility is grounded in Foucault's alleged reduction to anonymous structures of power, which obfuscates the relative autonomy of culture and agents' meaning-making. However, the agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* denies neither this autonomy nor the centrality of meaning-making. As we suggest in the case of protesting, a disciplinary *dispositif* was adopted by parliamentary reformers partly because these techniques promised to produce protesters who embodied codes of civility (see Alexander, 2006). Our agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* helps trace how agents were able to perform these codes through disciplinary techniques, partly drawn from non-civil cultural spheres, which created new ways of making protesting visible. Instead of opposing the autonomy of cultural codes, the agent-inclusive version of the *dispositif* shows us how these codes are integrated into *dispositifs* that shape agents and may traverse multiple cultural spheres.

With these sketches, we invite further integration of dispositional analytics, even within sociological traditions sceptical of Foucauldian analytics. Our agent-inclusive elaboration of the *dispositif* enables such unexpected encounters, opening up a new toolbox for sociologists interested in agency and change.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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