



REVIEW

Patrick G. Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection: Foucault, Discipline, and Early Christian Resistance*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020. Pp. 277. ISBN: 9781978704626 (hardback), ISBN: 9781978704633 (electronic).

The (Counter)Power of Resurrection

The Power of Resurrection: Foucault, Discipline, and Early Christian Resistance (2020) is the title of a recent book written by Patrick G. Stefan that seeks to analyze the rise of a radical idea: namely, that of the material resurrection of the body, both Jesus's and his believers' bodies, in the early Christian movement. Stefan's thesis relies on historical evidence that the belief of resurrection introduced a politically subversive idea in human history. This idea is said to have given birth to a world-changing movement that resists in our culture up to the present day. The belief that a man, condemned to death by the Roman imperial government, rose from the dead, was indeed a radical belief. But how did it gain so much traction in the Roman world? The power of the early Christian movement – Stefan claims – consisted in what he calls the "rhetorical strategy of resurrection"; a strategy that led to the subversion of the Roman imperial power by challenging its sovereign right to death. Taking the cue from Foucault's studies on sovereignty, disciplinary and pastoral power, Stefan tries to answer one of the most compelling and difficult historical questions: how is it possible that the early Christian movement grew so quickly? And did the idea and the hope in resurrection play a crucial role in it?

The answer brought up by Stefan's conclusions is that the rhetorical force of resurrection, as well as the deployment of new forms of disciplinary mechanisms of power, contributed to the rise of Christianity and the subversion of the Roman Empire. Stefan's methodology is very clear. He tries to overcome the theological as well as the social-scientific and postcolonial approach to early Christian history by using Foucault's analysis of micro-level force relations as a tool to combine the inquiry into the early Christian message and its social effectiveness. If theology concentrated its efforts on proving the superiority of the Christian revelation in order to explain the quick expansion of the Christian movement, the sociological approach de-emphasized what Christians were saying and tried to give a social and "realistic" picture of what happened. Moreover, the postcolonial or literary approach tried to describe Christian texts by reading a counter-

imperial political content in them, focusing mostly on the hidden transcripts that testify to an internal Christian resistance to the empire. Proposing a mediate approach, Stefan's interpretation overcomes the limits of all three methods. Bringing the Christian message (*knowledge-truth*) and disciplinary mechanisms (*power*) together in an organic relationship (*knowledge/power*), the work of Stefan presents a Foucauldian genealogy of the early Christian "counter-power", showing how its discourse on resurrection contributed to the expansion of the Christian movement.¹

The three main goals of Stefan's work are in fact to demonstrate *that* resurrection is a politically subversive idea based on the Pauline corpus, *why* it was so subversive and *how* it actually changed things in lived reality. Using Foucault for his historical purposes, Stefan dates the formation of the mechanisms of disciplinary power back to the very beginning of Christianity. As we know from *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault described the beginning of disciplinary practices by connecting them to the appearance of the monastic life in the fourth century. These mechanisms lived for centuries in the religious sphere and turned into disciplinary power in late modernity with the historical appearance of institutions such as psychiatry, medicine or education. Stefan's historical thesis states that disciplinary mechanisms of power have a longer history behind them. During the early stages of Christian expansion, Stefan describes how the message of resurrection gave birth to some techniques of disciplinary power that contributed to the expansion of Christianity by challenging the sovereign power of Rome. The idea of resurrection was, at its core, a politically subversive message – Stefan claims. It was instrumental in forming the early material and textual history of a Christian disciplinary identity. This formation – a formation that influenced the calendar and the perception of time, the liturgy and its rituals, the architecture and the use of space, the hierarchical division of communities and their obedience, and even the perception of a dualistic self (*body/soul*) – formed a new "disciplined" subject that was able to envision *life* outside the sovereign power of Caesar.

At the time in which the Christian movement appeared, sovereignty was the dominant form of power. Centered on Caesar's person and enforced through corporal punishment, the sovereign power of Rome was challenged and subverted by the appearance of "disciplined" Christians that were unafraid of his sword. Taking as its point of departure Paul's soteriological theology of the cross, Stefan's book is based on the assumption that the Roman persecution of Christians only made them grow stronger. Through the appearance of the idea of resurrection, martyrdom and Christian burial practices, the punishment of the *body* – the Roman's sovereign right to death – was no longer effective. Serving a "new King" that defeated death and watched over their *souls*, Christians undermined Caesar's coercive power and formed new disciplinary mechanisms that addressed the new Christian subjects to the obedience to God. These new practices of power subverted the sovereignty of Rome and contributed to shaping a new ritual behavior that led to the formation of communities that lived in the cult and admiration of a crucified criminal. In Foucault's terms, we could say that Stefan explains the historical

¹"It relies upon the counter-imperial message of resurrection in early Christian texts but also recognizes the need to identify how that message produced social and material mechanisms to explain this phenomenon" (Patrick G. Stefan, *The Power of Resurrection: Foucault, Discipline, and Early Christian Resistance* (2020), 10).

growth of the early Christian movement with a sort of “cult of Damians” that finds its strength in the subversive idea of his resurrection. Reading Stefan’s book, one gets the impression that he tried to explain the passage from Rome’s imperial power (*sovereign power*) to Christianity (*disciplinary power*) in the same way as Foucault explained the passage from the Ancient Régime to the disciplinary mechanisms of prison, medicine, and education. Building on Jacob Taubes’s lessons, Stefan gives a political theological interpretation of Paul’s epistolary, proposing a Nietzschean approach to early Christian history and its historical power; a power that relies on the subversion of the imperial values of Rome and that turned a weakness – Jesus’s death on the cross – into the most powerful weapon.

The main thesis of the book is summarized by Stefan’s words: “The Roman Imperial government, which maintained control through sovereign power, was challenged and subverted by the Christian deployment of disciplinary mechanisms of power activated by the discourse of resurrection” (52). After this first period of “disciplinary” rupture against the sovereign power of Rome, when the counter-imperial apocalyptic message inherent to the resurrection of Jesus lost its strength and after the Christianization of the Empire through Constantine the Great, Christianity returned to a model of power that deployed the strategies of ancient sovereign power. But disciplinary practices survived and found new space in the introspective monastic *self* of the fourth century, the main object of Foucault’s inquiry into Christianity. This is why we could say, in conclusion, that Stefan’s investigations form not only a very interesting contribution for scholars of early Christianity but also for Foucault scholars who want to understand the “sudden” rise of monastic practices in the fourth century.

Author info

Bianca Maria Esposito
bianca.esposito@sns.it
 Ph.D. Candidate
 Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa
 Italy

Bianca Maria Esposito is a PhD scholar at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, Italy. She is currently working on a thesis that involves a political and theological investigation of martyrdom.