

MICHEL FOUCAULT AND HIS THEORY OF PANOPTICISM

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INTRODUCTION

When anyone talks about power the first thing that comes to the Researcher's mind is knowledge is power and power is knowledge¹. This was a relation that Michel Foucault² delves into. His theories are something that is hard for even professors to understand, let alone the students. His theories are something that only he himself can totally understand. We can only decipher a part of what he tries to say, or that is something that we think. Maybe what we understand from his work is not what he meant to say or maybe it is, we will never know. It is due to this uncertainty that the Researcher wanted to work on Foucault's book Discipline and Punish. The Researcher has specifically chosen the part of panopticism as that is a topic that particularly interested him. The concept of one watching over the rest was something that captured my attention. Foucault was inspired to write about panopticism from Jeremy Bentham's concept of panopticons. The Researcher has tried my level best to try and analyze Foucault's work.

Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century proposed a new way prisons can be developed: the Panopticon. The Panopticon is an architectural design which made the prisoners aware of their surrounding reminding them that they are always being watched. The prisoners would not know whether they were being watched or not but there was this sense of awareness that they could be watched upon during any point in day or night. The prison cells were arranged in a circle with an observation tower at the centre. This observation tower could see inside all the prison cells. The windows of the observation tower were covered so that the prisoners could not know whether there was someone was inside or not. This design would increase security by facilitating more effective surveillance. Its significance for Foucault was that it reflected much of the philosophy of observation that has become a guiding principle of policing in the modern state. The use of video cameras both in cities and on roads employs the same principle of observation, so that the citizen is never entirely sure whether or not they are being watched. Although usually associated with prisons, the panoptic style of architecture might be used in other institutions with surveillance needs, such as schools, factories, or hospitals.

¹ Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault*, in *THE STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY* (Edward N. Zalta ed., Summer 2013 ed. 2013), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/foucault/> (last visited Sep 10, 2014).

² For more information on Michel Foucault please visit <http://www.michel-foucault.com/>

ANALYSIS

THE PLAGUE TOWN

When plague had been spread and it was uncertain how many people were infected. To evacuate an entire town would be absurd and so quarantine was declared. A daily role call would happen during which if someone did not answer s/he would be considered to be infected and immediately disposed of before they could infect anyone else. The infected were considered lepers and the doing away with them was considered purifying the society. This was a brutal yet effective way of waiting for the plague to end.

Foucault tries to make a connection between the plague and a state of chaos. This chaos was something that the State wanted to control and so the quarantine was put forth. This example clearly shows the extent to which State can go to gain power over the people. The panopticon and its use in prisons can be an example that relates to this.

The disciplinary institutions operate by:

1. The functional inversion of the disciplines
2. The swarming of disciplinary mechanisms
3. The State-control of the mechanisms of discipline

A disciplinary society only works when there are these 3 components

- (i) Techniques for economically acquiring power:

(Economic aspect)

- (ii) To extend the power as far as possible with maximum intensity:

“The panoptic modality of power- at the elementary, technical, merely physical level at which it is situated- is not under the immediate dependence or a direct extension of the great juridico-political structures of a society; it is nonetheless not absolutely independent” 221-222

From this portion Foucault tries to say that the panopticon is neither dependent nor independent of juridico-political structures of society.³

(Juricido-Political aspect)

³ CTheory.net, , <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=371> (last visited Sep 10, 2014).

- (iii) To link the ‘economic growth’ of this power with the institutions those exercise this power: schools, hospitals, barracks, industries, etc:

“The extension of the disciplinary methods is inscribed in a broad historical process: the development at about the same time of many other technologies- agronomical, industrial, economic. But it must be recognized that, compared with mining industries, the emerging chemical industries or methods of national accountancy, compared with the blast furnaces or the steam engine, panopticism has received little attention.”

Foucault says that the Panopticon did not receive as much attention and appreciation as it should. As Foucault considers prison as the crown and symbol of power there is no way he would believe that things such as steam engines or blast furnaces should receive more attention and hence the paragraph above arises. Other scientific discoveries should be given importance but it is the panopticon that should be given the most importance.

(Scientific aspect)

Through Bentham’s panopticon model Foucault delved deep into two relationships:

1. The relationship between knowledge and power.
2. The relationship between the system and society

THE POWER-KNOWLEDGE RELATIONSHIP

Bentham says that *“power should be visible and unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.”*

Suitable behaviour is achieved through a panoptic discipline not total surveillance.

“Visibility is a trap”

Not knowing whether someone was inside the central tower was the main reason for concealing the windows and even making sure that no shadows are seen. The prison inmates would always be thinking whether there is someone or not inside which would in turn makes them conscious. If shadows were visible then they would have known when there was someone was inside and when there was not. Even the door to this central tower had zigzag doors so that the shadows wouldn’t be visible.

“He is the object of information, never a subject in communication”

Without even being seen or heard he can track all of your movements. He collects information or maybe he doesn’t, there is no way to know as he is hidden behind the curtains. He will not talk to you but know many things about you while you would know anything about him. The guy in the central tower will always be an unknown while the prisoners’ every action can be viewed.

The more one observes, the more powerful one becomes. The power comes from the knowledge the observer has accumulated from his observations of actions in a circular fashion, with knowledge and power reinforcing each other.⁴

Foucault talks about the change of prisons from 'House of security' to 'House of certainty'. No more need for chains binding the prisoners or police going for daily checks on the prisoners. Tight security is not needed but efficient security is needed. The inclusion of the panopticon in prisons eased the burden on the security guards. One tower in the middle of the prison is enough to keep check on the prisoners and instill fears into their minds. The efficiency of the institution is maximized by keeping a constant eye on the people; the people are always visible to the institution.

"But the panopticon should not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use."

The panopticon is not a dream building as it controls the public rather than putting them at ease. The panopticon was built to control the prisoners but even society does the same with us, even if we don't realize it. Foucault considers modern prison the crown and symbol of power and control. Just like the state has learned how to control the prisoners Foucault says that society has done the same with us. Panoptical institutions like schools, barracks, hospitals, mental asylums, corporations, etc. all surround a central point: the state.

An example of NALSAR can be taken. The classrooms have tables arranged in a semi circle design with the teacher standing at the focus of the circle. From there the teacher can keep an eye on all the students at the same time. Without the students even knowing that they are being watched, the students chat with each other or play games on their mobile phones but the thing they don't know is that the teacher can see it all.

Panopticism brings a direct relation between surplus power and surplus production. The panopticon made it easy for the State as it reduced the number of people required who exercised power while in increased the number of people over whom the power was being exercised⁵. The surplus of power created a surplus production thus there was proliferation of disciplinary mechanism in society.

THE SYSTEM-SOCIETY RELATIONSHIP

As hinted at by the architecture, this panoptic design can be used for any "population" that needs to be kept under observation or control, such as: prisoners, schoolchildren, medical patients, or workers.⁶

⁴ Foucault and His Panopticon - power, knowledge, Jeremy Bentham, surveillance, smart mobs, protests, cooperation, philosopher, , <http://www.moyak.com/papers/michel-foucault-power.html> (last visited Sep 10, 2014).

⁵ [michel-foucault.com/ concepts](http://www.michel-foucault.com/concepts/), , <http://www.michel-foucault.com/concepts/> (last visited Sep 10, 2014).

⁶ James Grady, 2.15 PANOPTICON OF JOY SHIFT, <http://jamesjgrady.com/2012/06/07/2-15-panopticon-of-joy/> (last visited Sep 10, 2014).

Foucault talks about how there would be no risk of the panopticon increasing the power of an individual which would lead us into a tyrannical society. He says, “any member of society will have the right to come and see with his own eyes how the schools, hospitals, factories, prisons function.” The mere observation for a while cannot compare to the observation made by the State. Unlike the State we are not allowed access into other people’s accounts. The State recognizes us by our name, address, social security number, taxes and bills we pay and many more ways. The abuse of this power will eventually lead our society into a tyrannical rule and so I have to disagree with Foucault over here. We do not have the same power as the State has and so they will always remain above us, never equal with us.

“Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance”

What we see is just for a certain amount of time but what State observes is what we do all the time. The example of us going to see the panopticon is something that we will do maybe one day and for a few minutes. State on the other hand will always be in constant look out and so will have better knowledge than us thus have more power than us. So when we look it’s as if we are looking through a spectacle but when the State does it is as if we are being watched upon as a surveillance camera (new example given by me).

The function of the State does in a way influence tyranny. An example would be that the job of a prison guard would be to watch over the prisoners. The panopticon would take it to the extreme by watching each and every move made by the prisoners which in a way is dictatorship. The prisoners feel conscious of the power of the panopticon and thus do not live as freely as they would have if it wasn’t there.

Foucault says that disciplinary institutions should always keep an eye on the public just like an observatory. This is a clear reference to the panopticon.

“ ‘Discipline’ may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise..... function is to assume that discipline reigns over society as a whole.” 215-216

Discipline is a mechanism of power it is not power itself. It is a way in which power is exercised. It regulates the society and its behavioral patterns. Foucault over here implies that discipline is a process not an institution or an apparatus. He also says that it can be used in various ways.

Schools, hospitals, barracks, prisons, etc. are not the only disciplinary mechanisms prevalent in society. We have morals, social norms and our culture that we follow as well. These also make us act in a particular manner. We do not or actually cannot escape them. We are prisoners even without us realizing it: we act in a particular way because we are conscious about what society thinks about us or we behave in a particular way because of our morality. This shows that we are aware of our surrounding, we are watched by society.

CONCLUSION

In the chapter of Panopticism Foucault focuses on multiple issues but he relates all of them to create one great idea. The “house of security – house of certainty” part can be related to the “dream building” part which can be related to the “surplus power – surplus production” part.

Foucault brings a new explanation to an old concept, the Panopticon. The Panopticon was an idea brought forth by Jeremy Bentham. Foucault elaborates on Bentham’s model of the Panopticon and also brings it into a new light by introducing the term Panopticism and giving various examples and reasonings for why it is vital for society.

Foucault has a theory that states that power is everywhere. Just like his theory there is no central argument in the chapter, his argument is spread throughout the chapter.

The Researcher has tried his best to unravel the mysteries that Foucault presents in the chapter of Panopticism. All the information given above (well most of it) is the Researcher’s original work and so maybe a few concepts may have been misinterpreted but that is the journey of life: you make mistakes and then you learn from them.

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