

## Presentation on Foucault, DP, “Panopticism” chapter

### Overview of presentation

1. Bentham’s panopticon
2. theory of panopticism
3. my evaluation of this picture

#### 1. Bentham’s panopticon as a piece of architecture

- complete, one-way visibility from central watch tower, no visibility between cells or from cells back to tower (200)
- can function in any sort of disciplinary institution: a prison, a hospital, a psychiatric institution, a school, a workhouse (200-201)
- “conscious and permanent visibility” induces in the inmate the “automatic functioning of power” (201)
- anyone (or no one) can be in the observation tower, but b/c of feeling of constant surveillance, the inmates impose constraints on selves (202)
- don’t have to use force or a physical mechanism, use power of “mind over mind” (206)
- also a “laboratory of power”: isolated individuals can be observed and analyzed (203-204)
  - experimentation: testing different techniques, treatments (203-204)
- increase in productivity due to constant pressure of surveillance (206)

#### 2. Panopticism, in Foucault’s view

- In 17<sup>th</sup> c, plague-stricken towns would institute disciplinary methods temporarily, used in extreme times, but by 19<sup>th</sup> century, disciplinary institutions everywhere
- Why did this change take place? We have become a panoptic society: there has been a gradual extension of disciplinary mechanisms throughout the whole social body (209)
- Panoptic society is constantly permeated by discipline (as opposed to it being used only in extraordinary circumstances); “its aim is to strengthen the social forces, to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality” (208)
- 3 “profound processes” that take place (210)
  - at first, disciplines used to neutralize dangers, but later used to increase utility of individuals (positive, rather than just negative role)
  - swarming of disciplinary mechanisms: no longer just used in enclosed establishments but move out into society; e.g., power of school extends beyond the institution of the school when school can talk to parents if students seem to be having difficulties outside of school
  - state control of disciplines: centralized police force; police fill in the gaps where other disciplines can’t reach (213-215)

*What exactly is the relationship between the image of the Panopticon to the way panopticism permeates modern society?*

- Panopticon can’t exist in real life, but is a kind of pure model of the exercise of disciplinary power, abstracted from the actual, less perfect instances of this exercise
- In modern disciplinary institutions, many of the panopticon’s key features are the most prominent forms of control
  - threat of constant surveillance = coercion, self-monitoring, increased productivity
  - hyper-individualization, analysis, classification

### 3. My evaluation of this picture

- Is Panopticism a good account of the way our everyday disciplinary institutions function to produce high levels of productivity and efficiency, in places where many people go, such as schools and work
- Answer: no
  - Use of surveillance undeniably does increase institutions' productivity, but panopticism says that surveillance is the primary means of eliciting productivity
  - But if this is true, we could imagine that our institutions would get more and more productive the closer they approach to the panopticon. Is this the case?
  - No, there is more going on than panopticism accounts for
- We seem to have a tendency to actively desire surveillance of ourselves by fellow inmates, but in a way that gives us power over them
  - e.g., as students we may desire that our accomplishments be visible to other students, resulting in a feeling of superiority; this desire increases productivity; same thing can happen in the workplace
  - there are two kinds of relationships in panopticism: surveying authority to inmate (student, worker), and surveyed inmate to surveyed inmate
  - the latter is likely very effective in creating productivity as it is a more precarious power relation (e.g., if a usually high-achieving student receives results lower than a student surveying her, then the power relation becomes unstable
  - inmate-inmate relationship won't function as effectively if we move closer to panoptic model because visibility between inmates is reduced or eliminated
- A possible objection to the above argument: the desire to accomplish more than others is part of the overall pressure that the authority-inmate relationship produces in us; if we weren't already being analyzed and ranked against each other, we would not be competing and measuring ourselves against one another in the first place
  - response: we act out this tendency voluntarily even when we are clearly not being coerced to do so by disciplinary methods; e.g., social media—we brag about ourselves on social media sites not b/c we are coerced to do so, but because we want others to see our accomplishments and good qualities

### Questions

1. Is this a convincing objection to Foucault's classification of all our disciplinary institutions as panoptic (or do I have it all wrong)?
2. Does it even matter very much to Foucault's overall project whether our every disciplinary institutions function this way, given that Foucault is most concerned with the function of our penal system?

### Discussion

#### *Question 1*

In the plague-stricken town: you have syndics & intendants, surveilling, writing things down. In the prisons, you could equate these to correctional officers, wardens. In schools: principal, teachers. So I do think that many institutions are like the panopticon. But maybe maybe not all; there may be others that are not.

pp. 206-207: panopticon can be integrated into any function: you can apply it to any relationship, including student to student, inmate to inmate, etc. E.g., university wants me to compare myself to other students, then to work harder to be better than others.

When talking about the peer to peer relations, this seems to presuppose a certain amount of equality which may not always exist. E.g., students are at different levels (different years), so they may interact with one another more like the surveyor/surveyed.

Isn't the peer-to-peer relationship the same as the surveyor/surveyed relationship when you look at these carefully?

Think about the difference between prisoners and students in peer-to-peer relationship: you know that if you behave the best in prison you may get treated the best; for students, you have competition for grades but you don't always know those grades of other students. Can we have an effective peer-to-peer relationship like described here for students?