Visualising a Foucauldian Society: Panopticism, IT, Self-Surveillance and the Soul

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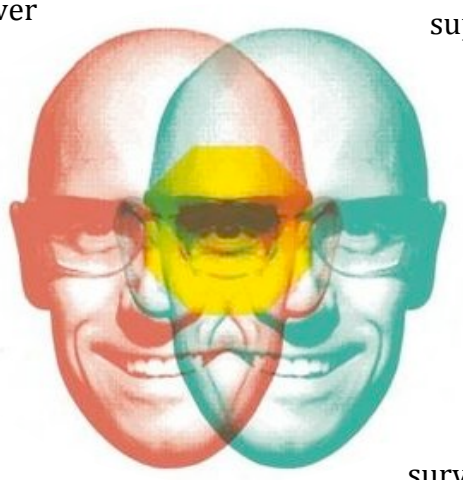
"We are much less Greeks than we believe. We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism."

– Michel Foucault (1995: 217)

Beginning with a short description of Jeremy Bentham's "Panopticon", this piece shall attempt to construct a brief vision of a disciplinary society resonating power over individual autonomy, whilst appearing as a democratic state of freedom. The architectural design of Bentham's Panopticon, a central, visually obstructed watchtower surrounded by a circular building consisting of prison cells, allows for a guard to observe without the inhabitants" knowledge. Through isolation of the individual, and the individual's knowledge that they are visible yet unable to verify whether they are being watched; the panopticon successfully maintains order whilst reducing the individual to an "object of information" (Foucault, 1995: 200). Additionally, in the fear of observation, the individual regulates their own behaviour; heralding the rise of self-surveillance. Although originally an architectural prison design, the panopticon's ability to proliferate discipline can be observed within "the very foundations of society" (Foucault, 1995: 208).

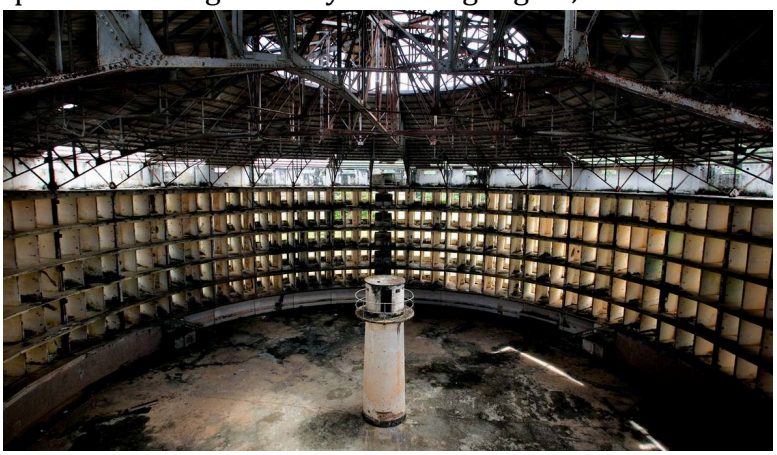


Focusing on schools, hospitals, prisons, workplaces, policing and the army, Foucault (1995) illustrates a vivid image, through which he traces the course of power surging through these societal structures. He identifies how institutions such as the school and the hospital cease to operate as "closed fortresses", and become flexible agents of control by their ability to "circulate in a free state" (1995: 211). The Christian School exemplifies this: going beyond its imperative function to train, it operates as a legitimate form of surveillance upon the child's exterior life. Through interaction with the child's parents, the school is able to conduct observations that penetrate the children's family and exercise regular supervision over their behaviour (Foucault, 1995). Institutions are not only able to exercise discipline, but also function as "centres of observation disseminated throughout society" (1995: 212). They become the mechanisms of discipline and observation, beginning to form a collective network of surveillance that transcends their individual jurisdictions.

However, the capability of these mechanisms is under the constant supervision and control of the state, which partially explains the organisation of a centralised policing agency. As Foucault describes, the police "is an apparatus that must be coextensive with the entire social body" (1995: 213); an apparatus that can freely interact with the mechanisms of

discipline to exercise an ever-broadening scope of surveillance upon the population. Furthermore, the police, which also functions as an auxiliary of justice, is possibly the most vehement and blatant mechanism of discipline. Supported by armed force, the police are "the instrument for the political supervision of plots, opposition movements or revolts" (1995: 215). Using both its manipulation over the mechanisms of discipline (schools, hospitals, workplaces, etc.), and its legitimised function as a utility of justice, the police intervene where other mechanisms cannot operate, "disciplining the non-disciplinary spaces" (1995: 215).

Although only briefly examined, Foucault constructs a vision by which we can visualise a far-reaching societal structure that conducts the technologies of power through every individual under its reign. As the technologies of power are distributed through colossal social structures, it is possible to recognise how the panopticon metaphor bears relevance. Individuals are exposed to the surveillance and discipline of these macro institutions which coerce behaviour through two methods. Firstly, the individual's knowledge of their own visibility may invoke self-surveillance and regulation of one's behaviour. Secondly, institutions wield the ability to discipline - a technology of power exercised incessantly. Pertaining to the latter, Foucault (1995) notes how the technologies of discipline, such as the workplace, are not only means of repression, but mechanisms of production; of the production of subjects. The discipline exercised through these mechanisms seeks not only to neutralise damaging behaviour, such as the prevention of theft, but to train, correct and supervise in order to produce "useful individuals" (1995: 211). Reflecting upon the workplace, Foucault recognises how discipline "tends to increase aptitudes, speeds, output and therefore profits" (1995: 210). Foucault ventures beyond the classical Marxist explanation of proletarian exploitation; he presents a formula. The power harnessed within these institutions, exercised through discipline, is actively converted into a workforce, thus providing an economy. This is especially relevant to the school and the workplace.



Foucault's notion of discipline may well apply to a mode of production reliant on the manual work of humans, but for academics such as Bell (1999), the nature of labour has refocused on information and services; the "post-industrial" era is in motion. This is certainly the case in the UK, with the service sector liable for approximately 81% of jobs in 2011 (ONS, 2013). Yet discipline, and its use as a technology of power, may be of increasing importance in the maintenance and order of a post-industrial society. As Lyon (1988) highlights, the introduction of information technologies has changed the dynamic within the workplace, causing academics to debate the notion of de-skilling. In short, in many instances information technologies allow for greater production, with less labour power (Lyon, 1988). Those in skilled trades are reduced to operating machines, often leading to "deterioration in worker concentration, care, and willingness to take responsibility" (Lyon, 1988: 72). With the deterioration in worker attitude, it may be the role of discipline, exercised through the technologies of power, to coerce the individual into resuming work. Discipline may occur in two formats: firstly, those who become adversaries to their de-skilled position will suffer reprimands and penalties to re-condition their behaviour, guiding them back to work. Secondly, the future generations of information technology operators are already being taught how to operate, compromise with and even *love* information technology. This occurs within the confines of the school, where individuals are now trained with information technology, to learn about the liberating and highly productive aspects of information technology. Without Foucauldian discipline, and its ability

to coerce and train individuals, it is possible to envision a mass de-regulation of the workplace, as many are increasingly displaced by the docile skill of the machine.

Moving away from the notion of discipline, let us refocus on a concept previously mentioned: self-surveillance. Foucault claims that the bourgeoisie is perfectly "aware that a new constitution or legislature will not suffice to assure its hegemony" (1980: 156). Therefore, new technologies of power are created to maintain control of the entire social body, capturing even the most infinitesimal particles (Foucault, 1980). Foucault recognises Bentham as an exemplary inventor of the technologies of power; through "panopticism" and its ability to indoctrinate one into a mode of self-surveillance. He claims that systems of surveillance have the ability to render material constraints, such as armed violence, redundant.

As long as there is a gaze, wherein each individual "under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer" (Foucault, 1980: 155), then power is exercised continuously, maintaining appropriate order. The individual will continue to regulate and address their behaviour in the knowledge that they are being watched; not just through the mechanisms of power, but increasingly monitoring one another. This could not pose more relevance to a post-industrial society. Information technology has not only affected modes of production, but is used to create identities (Turkle, 2011). Turkle (2011) suggests that social networking sites, created by information technology, have forced us to create a virtual identity; one we narcissistically hone to satisfy cultural values and moral regulations. The theory of self-surveillance is exemplified perfectly in cyberspace.

Self-surveillance, amongst other technologies of power (discipline), is a contributing factor to Foucault"s belief that this system is diabolical. This is because there is no one group or individual that stands to profit from the panoptic machine; it is a "machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised" (1980: 156). Power is no longer a right of birth, it has become a product that no one owns. Although a large portion of this reflection has been devoted to a description of Foucault's work, I would like to conclude this piece by considering one effect of living in the "panoptic machine".

As one is subjugated under the disciplinary practices aforementioned, a "surplus power" (Foucault, 1995: 29) is produced from the body. Similar to the surplus value generated from exploited labour (Callinicos, 1983), "surplus power" produces the "soul". Foucault dispels the notion of the soul as a metaphysical entity, or a product of Christian theology, but acknowledges the soul as having a material reality, as it is replicated on and "within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished" (1995: 29). Yet generally, the soul is not exclusive to the condemned, but any who are supervised, trained or corrected (Foucault, 1995). As the soul is the representation of a technology of power over the body, Foucault clearly identifies it as the embodiment of constraint upon the individual: "the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body" (1995: 30). *Are we all imprisoned within the panoptic machine?*

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Image 2:

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Image 3:

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