

Foucault's
panopticism as
applied to dubois: the
ideal model of
power?



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As a type of power that is vital to the function of institutions, discipline works to control the thoughts and actions of individuals to fulfill a specific agenda, such as preserving public safety or maximizing profits. Although numerous variations of power exist, institutions idealize the efficiency of panopticism, a psychological model of discipline. By discussing the manipulation of the human mind, Foucault's "Panopticism" advocates for this "visible and unverifiable" (201) power which increases the efficiency of institutions and DuBois' "Of Our Spiritual Striving" analyzes the use of psychological discipline to address "problematic" black people (4). Group mentality, the idea that the disciplined party will act as a group, either to resign themselves to a life of insignificance and inefficiency or to become productive members of society is an integral aspect of panopticism. DuBois' work seems to highlight panopticism's dependence on group mentality as a potential vulnerability, but through the application of Foucault's lens to DuBois' work, one realizes that DuBois' work portrays how this perceived vulnerability actually strengthens the disciplinary system by making it more efficient, which is important in refining panopticism, a system that Foucault repeatedly calls the "ideal model of discipline".

Even if the Panopticon and similar institutions effectively discipline and "strengthen social forces" (Foucault 207), they are not necessarily foolproof. In "Panopticism" and "Of Our Spiritual Striving", authority figures observe individuals in order to control their psychological state. The Panopticon's architecture allows constant visibility of the inmates since "full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected" (Foucault 200). The psychological pressure of being watched

causes the observed to demonstrate their best attributes since they do not want to incur judgment from the onlookers or retribution from the guards that may be examining their actions. This tendency to hide imperfections from the public causes humans to “ become the principle of [their] own subjection” (Foucault 203). Since power does not manifest in physical form in this scenario, Foucault's psychologically-driven mechanism of discipline depends on groups that consider the consequences of their actions rather than yielding to desperation and acting according to their emotions. Modeled after Foucault's panopticism, DuBois' society strives to establish an efficient disciplinary system which requires little time and resources to operate. The resulting system allows the white population to exert psychological discipline on the black population by constantly observing and judging them. DuBois' work discusses the effect of judgment on the black population. While judgment pressures black people to further themselves, it also leaves them prone to self-degradation, which may ultimately lead to a decrease in the efficiency of the disciplinary system.

Given evidence from “ Of Our Spiritual Striving”, there are logical reasons for thinking that DuBois' work emphasizes panopticism's vulnerabilities by highlighting its dependence on group mentality. Under the pressure of prison walls or an oppressive society, maintaining rationality may be difficult for disciplined groups. Since panopticism's role as an “ intensifier of power... may [confiscate or impede]” power (Foucault 208), desperation among the disciplined may result. This desperation decreases the effectiveness of panopticism, a concept which Foucault acknowledges, claiming that the “ productive increase of power can be assured only if... it can be exercised

continuously...in the subtlest possible way" (208). Unfortunately, the constant observation, judgment, and prejudice that the disciplined must endure become oppressive to the extent where they can no longer be classified as [continuous] and [subtle] (Foucault 208) forms of psychological discipline. Once prejudice and judgment infringe on the continuity and subtleness of power, panopticism morphs into " sudden, violent, discontinuous forms [of discipline]" (Foucault 208) that no longer guarantee efficiency. Given the overbearing nature of society, an institution modeled after panopticism, people may experience " bitterness, distrust, [desperation, and] resentfulness" (DuBois 5). In the face of desperation, the black population may cease their efforts to further themselves, thinking that "[they] are diseased and dying...[they] cannot write, [their] voting is vain; what need of education since [they] must always cook and serve" (DuBois 10)? If such inefficient, self-degrading sentiments permeated the entire black population due to the existence of group mentality, then how did DuBois' society, modeled on the core principles of the Panopticon model, exist efficiently despite its dependence on group mentality?

As it turns out, panopticism's efficiency is strengthened by its dependence on group mentality. Group mentality is exemplified in the military, an institution that derives its power from panopticism. This group mentality allows the institution to exist, not as an assembled crowd but as a unity that derives from this very unity an increase in its forces; discipline increases the skill of each individual, coordinates these skills...broadens the fronts of attack...increases the capacity for resistance (Foucault 210). In essence, group mentality enhances all the positive attributes of each member of the

military. When viewing DuBois' society through panopticism's lens of group mentality, one realizes that the divisiveness between black and white individuals hinders progress and decreases the efficiency of the Panopticon model. Neither black people nor white people exist without flaws or gaps in talent, which makes collaboration between the races vital to societal progress.

If Foucault's lens is not applied to DuBois' society, these groups may never "give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack" (DuBois 11). The missing attributes prevent the blacks and whites from maximizing their potential, thus creating a less than ideal disciplinary system. Therefore, the application of Foucault's lens to DuBois' work allows the reader to realize that panopticism is actually strengthened by its dependence on group mentality. Unity between races and between the disciplined and their superiors maximizes efficiency since the strengths and weaknesses of each group creates a harmonic balance.

According to Foucault, unity between the disciplined and their superiors establishes a community of efficient individuals who can perform virtually perform any task, from protecting the nation to mass manufacturing. Applying this concept of community to DuBois' society would liberate black people from self-degradation, giving them the opportunity to solve their social problems. As a result, they will become positive contributors to society rather than being the race in need of discipline. Instead of having their "powers of body and mind...wasted, dispersed, or forgotten," they can "be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, escape from both death and isolation, husband and use [their] best powers and [their] latent genius" (DuBois 5).
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This group mentality frees the black population from their feelings of inferiority so that they can make progress.

According to DuBois, if the black population in society is not incorporated productively into the community, their self-doubt will cause them to compare themselves to their white counterparts. This competition between the races is inherently unfair since blacks, "without land, tools, or savings, had entered into competition with rich, landed, skilled neighbors," leaving them at the "very bottom of hardships" and "feeling the weight of [their] ignorance, - not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities" (DuBois 9). The unfavorable results of this competition often lead black people toward additional self-degradation. Although some black people have become determined to prove their value to their white counterparts, others become discouraged if they cannot achieve as much as their white peers, leading to self-discouragement and inefficiency. Therefore, it is best for "a people thus handicapped not to be asked to race with the world but rather to be allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems" (DuBois 9). Self-pity and resentment are counter-productive to the disciplinary mechanism's ultimate goal of efficiency. However, the self-magnified psychological pressure that accompanies the group mentality, such as the fear of disappointing one's community, increases the effectiveness of Foucault's system. Therefore DuBois' work allows the reader, after careful consideration, to realize that Foucault's panopticism is actually stronger because it depends on the acquiescence and unity of the masses.

However, Foucault fails to realize that dependence on group mentality, through the promotion of unity and the sense of community, potentially liberates the disciplined from self-doubt, thus increasing the efficiency of his system. Most of the shortcomings in Foucault's model result from his generalizations of humans. He does not consider the mindsets of marginalized people when creating this psychological model of discipline and he fails to anticipate the self-disparagement and desperation that may plague their sentiments and drive them towards resentment of authority. In Foucault's perspective, isolation and observation allow authority figures to exert power over people's minds, which results in efficient reform and peaceful submission of power, without employing numerous guards, building fortress-like prisons, or tormenting prisoners. Therefore panopticism seems like an ideal model because it utilizes psychological discipline to arrange power... mak[ing] it more economic and more effective...to strengthen the social forces...to develop the economy, spread education, [and] raise the level of public morality" (Foucault 207-208).

Unfortunately, panopticism is not ideal since it can still be improved, and it will not be ideal until its dependence on group mentality is embraced.

Although the examination of Du Bois' work immediately raises awareness about the potential vulnerability of the Panopticon model, the analysis of DuBois' work through the lens of Foucault seems to highlight that in the right scenarios, panopticism derives its strength from the existence of group mentality.