

Michel foucault essay



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In regards to Panopticism, Michel Foucault theorizes, “ The exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague do not bring with them the same political dream. ” I conclude that the term, “ political dream”, is an idea where people use power and knowledge in an attempt to achieve a perfectly governed society. Gradually, social reforms transformed how the political dream was viewed. Over the past few hundred years, techniques for social reform have improved, leading up to where we are today.

In the 17th century, due to the epidemic of the disease known as the Plague, the technique used to strive for the political dream was to keep those who were infected under control by dividing the town into quarters. Each quarter was governed by an intendant, and a syndic who keeps the quarters under surveillance. The inhabitants were ordered to stay indoors, and leaving would result in pain of death. The inhabitants that were infected by the plague were locked inside their house by a guard, or syndic, who had possession of the key.

The inhabitants that were infected with the plague were prisoners in their homes. Inspections were done on a regular basis, where the syndic would go to the street that he was responsible for, and would demand the inhabitants to show their face at the window when their names were called. The syndic would keep track of the inhabitants and their condition. The intendant, on a daily basis, observed whether or not the syndic had completed his job. The surveillance in the 17th century was based on confining the inhabitants, and the reports from the syndic, to the intendant, to the magistrates.

The document, which includes the inhabitants name, sex, and condition, is copied and given to the intendant and the town hall. The magistrates have total control over the medical treatment of the inhabitants. Discipline was the prime source of power during the plague. According to Foucault, the political dream of the plague consisted of strict divisions, the penetration of regulation through the power of the complete hierarchy, and the assignment to each inhabitants true name, true place, true body, and true disease.

The people of the plague self-governed themselves in the idea that they spoke up to get treatment, and made sure to abide by the rules to avoid the pain of death. The plague serves as an image in which the idea of discipline was created. The techniques for measuring and supervising abnormal beings, brings about the disciplinary mechanisms created by the plague. In the 18th century, ‘ the lepers gave rise to the rituals of exclusion. ’ However, rather than dividing the lepers, which was the technique used during the plague, a multiple separation, an in depth surveillance system, and development of power was needed.

The mechanism used to achieve this was J. Bentham’s Panopticon. The panopticon is perceived as a product of political technology. The panopticon is an annular building with a tower in the center. The tower includes wide windows. The building is divided into cells, and has a window in the inside of the cell which corresponds with the tower, and another window on the outside that allows light to enter the cell. Each individual is placed into a cell, and an inspector is placed in the central tower where he observes the individuals.

The inspector can see the individuals, but the individuals cannot see the inspector. In the panoptic, if the individual is a convict, there is no danger of escaping or future crime, if the individual is a patient, there is no risk of contagion. , and if the individual is a worker, there is no risk of theft or unions that will cause the rate of work to slow down. The architecture of the panopticon serves as perfection of power. The perfection of power is considered visible and unverifiable. The individual has the view of the tower where he is watched upon, but never knows when he is being looked at.

The inspector sees everything, without ever being seen. Force was not needed to change the convicts behavior, the madman to calm himself, or the worker to provide work. It was not necessary to constrain the individuals. All that was needed was the clear separations and well-arranged openings. It was made possible for the inspector to view performances, development, behavior, stubbornness or laziness among the individuals. The individuals in the panopticon, in a sense, self-governed themselves to acceptable behavior that was required from them.

There was a sense of self-awareness, in the idea that the individuals made aware their actions because they were never certain when they were being watched upon. Since the 17th and 18th century, there has been many social reforms that lead up to present time. Today, individuals such as convicts are held in actual prisons, where they are in lockdown in a cell, either individually or with another inmate. The inmates must abide by the Correctional Officers. It is ideal for the inmates to conform into better human beings. The mechanism used in prisons are surveillance systems.

Today, there are surveillance cameras, that are viewed by the watchmen, and recorded. The Correctional Officers also keep close eye to the inmates. The Correctional Officers do a daily head count to keep track of the inmates, and the count is then given to the watchmen. Discipline is held against the inmates for power. If the inmates do not comply with the rules, or do something detrimental, there are consequences. Some of the consequences are, what is considered, the seven day diet, in which the inmate is given a block of food packed together, and it's not considered appetizing.

There is also the consequence of the inmate being sent to the SHU, also known as the Secure Housing Unit. The SHU is an isolated area, still under surveillance, that consists of cruel and unusual punishment due to the severity of the inmates actions. The SHU may cause ' SHU syndrome" which is a syndrome close to post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and even hallucinations. The inmates also, in a sense, self-govern themselves to stay in line to avoid harsh consequences, and to achieve freedom outside the cells.

Power and knowledge by those in charge, permit inmates to have self-awareness of their actions as well. Over the past hundred years, up to today, there are differences in the mechanisms used to achieve the political dream. In the 17th century, the mechanism used to strive for the political dream was the division of the town into quarters, to keep those who were infected by the plague under control. Each quarter was governed by an intendant, and under surveillance by a syndic. Power was mobile, and presented visibly. Defiance lead to death.

After the fear of the plague, there was the panoptic establishment in the 18th century, which was the generalized model of functioning power and discipline. The panopticon reformed prisoners, treated patients, instructed students, confined the insane, and provided the poor with work, and every individual was watched over by the inspector in the central tower. Unlike the division and confining of individuals during the plague, the only mechanism in the panopticon was the architecture and geometry, and acts directly on the individuals. Today, in the prisons, the inmates are confined in a building, where they reside in cells, and are watched upon by Correctional Officers and surveillance cameras. Their actions determine their chance of freedom or punishment. The moments in history include the epidemic of the plague in the 17th century, and the panoptic that reformed the individuals in the 18th century. Today, reformation still continues. It is visible in the public life, whether being the prison system which conforms the inmates to ideal behavior, hospitals to aid patients, psychiatric hospitals to confine and treat the mentally ill, and the workforce to provide jobs to individuals.

Each involve some sort of use for power and knowledge. In conclusion, each century had a political dream, and strived differently to achieve it through altered techniques and mechanisms. Overtime, social reform has improved, which leads us to present time. In each century, discipline and punishment was used through power and knowledge over the people. Whether being divided or confined, individuals were, and still are, conditioned to abide by the higher power, which ideally, aims to establish a perfectly governed society.