

# Panopticon

Sociology



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The Panopticon was an idea first put forward by the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham near the close of the eighteenth century. Its essential idea was simple: that a building could be designed in such a way that every member within it could be observed from a single point, but the observer himself could not be observed by the people he was observing. The building would essentially be a rotund with a pillar or tower in the middle to house the observer (when he is present) and cells or divided spaces along the outside to house whomever is supposed to be observed. The eventual goal of such a structure would be the self-policing of whomever was supposed to be observed, caused by the constant surveillance of observer (Utilitarianism.org, 2010).

Jeremy Bentham thought the panopticon was a genius idea. He imagined the essential design as being excellent for any people that needed observing, primarily penitentiaries, but also “ Prisons, houses of Industry, Work-Houses, Poor-Houses, Lazarettos, Manufactories, Hospitals, Mad-Houses and Schools” (Bentham 1798, 29). His most famous quote on the subject is that the structure could have a wide range of benefits: “ Morals reformed - health preserved - industry invigorated, instruction diffused - public burthens (sic) lightened” all through, according to Bentham, a simple architectural idea (53). He thought that all of this could be accomplished because people need constant surveillance to do what is right, to do what they should be doing. He imagined that the efficiency of factories could be heavily increased, because you would need only one manager to supervise everyone from a single vantage point, and thus no one would ever be able to steal from the factory, take a break, or do anything else the manager did not want. Furthermore, at most a single person would be required to supervise, creating huge

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efficiencies for the economy. Bentham did not realize, however, that this inherently cheapens human relationships. Michel Foucault, one of the most brilliant thinkers of the twentieth century, pointed this out. He argued that the panopticon illuminates any relationship of trust, and turns humans into an economic commodity who are only of value when conducting the behaviour that the supervisor desired of them (Foucault 1977).

One of the ideas that most pleased Bentham about the structure of his design was the fact that the observer need not necessarily be observed by the rest of the population – he could be hidden behind a screen of some sort. This means, and this was the idea that Bentham found possibly the most genius out of everything – that the observer need not be present at all times. He could go or come as he pleased, or be removed from the situation completely, and the population would continue to police themselves out of fear that the observer would be present at any particular time. This means that a single person observing for a few hours per day could create the impression that there was always someone watching you constantly. “ The apparent omnipresence of the inspector” Bentham writes, is one of the chief “ advantages of the plan” (Bentham 1778). Foucault states, however, that this is probably one of the most abusive aspects of the panopticon – that getting people to enforce prescribed behaviour on themselves for fear of some unknown agent watching them, ready to punish them if they ever put a toe out of line, is one of the worst and most oppressive forms of social control imaginable (Foucault 1977).

Jeremy Bentham’s “ Panopticon” is an excellent example of an idea which might at first blush seem to be good, have economic efficiencies and so on, but when inspected on a closer level is found to be incredibly abusive and <https://assignbuster.com/panopticon/>

dehumanizing. This is something we must be constantly aware of, especially as changes to our society including pervasive cameras and the internet could allow these a panopticon to develop without our even realizing it (Bringall, 2002).

#### Works Cited

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