

Essay on panopticism of michel foucault

[Education](#), [Discipline](#)



In his book "Discipline and Punish" Michel Foucault establishes a social theory called panopticism. The title of this theory originated from the idea of Jeremy Bentham's prison called Panopticon. Foucault gives a detailed description of this 18th century prison that was constructed in a very sophisticated way: a supervisor can easily control each prisoner, while prisoners never see anyone and are completely alone. Foucault admires the construction of the building: "And this invisibility is a guarantee of order". (Foucault, p. 287) Thus, Panopticon's major effect is "to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power". (Foucault, p. 288) And this system of supervision is perfect for any category of people, not only prisoners: convicts, patients, madmen, schoolchildren, workers and other representatives of the society. Bentham described this structure in the following way: "Morals reformed - health preserved - industry invigorated, instruction diffused - public burthens lightened - Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock - the gordian knot of the Poor-Laws are not cut, but untied - all by a simple idea in Architecture!" (Bentham)

What is also very good about this system is the necessary to organize the process of supervising only once, and the system will never stop functioning or fail. The effect of Panopticon is permanent. This architectural apparatus suggested by Bentham can be a machine that creates and sustains power relationship regardless of the person whoever is in charge of it. Bentham laid a principle that power should be unverifiable and visible. The unverifiable aspect is achieved in the following way: "The inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment", and also "he must be

sure that he may always be so". (Foucault, p. 288) Correspondingly the aspect of visible is achieved in this way: " The inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon". (Foucault, p. 288) So, the Panopticon appears to be not only an ideal prison. Its features make it a very important mechanism that disindividualizes and automatizes power. Besides, it is not important who gains this power: any individual may be taken at random and granted with authority to be in charge and control the power. If the director is absent, this huge and powerful machine can be operated by anyone: his family, his relatives, his servants, visitors or friends.

Mason observes that Panopticon for M. Foucault is a certain metaphor that helps to explore the following relationships between: " 1.) systems of social control and people in a disciplinary situation and, 2.) the power-knowledge concept. In his view, power and knowledge comes from observing others". (Mason) This marks the certain transition to a disciplinary power. Every event is recorded and every movement is supervised. As a result docility, normalization, discipline and acceptance of regulations take place. The idea is that suitable behavior is achieved not by means of absolute surveillance, but by the discipline of panoptic character. Foucault says that " by being combined and generalized, they attained a level at which the formation of knowledge and the increase in power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process" (qtd. in Mason). The power comes from the accumulated knowledge with power and knowledge reinforcing each other.

Works cited:

Bentham, Jeremy. The Panopticon Writings. 27 May 2012 <http://www.utilitarianism.com/panopticon.html>

Foucault, Michel. Panopticism.

Mason, Moya K. Foucault and His Panopticon. 27 May 2012 <http://www.moyak.com/papers/michel-foucault-power.html>