

THE DIGITALIZATION OF BENTHAM'S PANOPTICON

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INTRODUCTION

As the title might suggest, the reading is focused on the modernisation of the Bentham Panopticon and its digitalisation. The fact that the panopticon is often compared to the modern model of surveillance is largely discussed, many disapprove but both sides find their foundations on valuable statements. Whether the panopticon can be used as a metaphor for modern projects of discipline or not, to take a position in this debate it is empirical to understand the origins and the functionality of the panopticon original structure. This knowledge can be achieved with the help of Foucault's analysis in his book "Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison", where he links the origins of disciplinary projects, so also of the panopticon, to the methods used to fight the plague and where he describes the Bentham architectural model of the panopticon and Bentham's rather utopic ideas of future society.

MAIN BODY

In paragraph three of "Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison" Foucault focuses on the birth of disciplinary projects and with them of the first prisons created to discipline convicts and not only to punish them, the Bentham panopticon is one of these prisons. In the first pages of the paragraph Foucault starts with explaining how big threats for humanity as cataclysms or pandemics often are the cause for drastically changes in social structure and behaviour. Foucault uses two different behaviours as example, both adopted to fight a pandemic and both influenced the organization of the society also after the pandemic was defeated; The first method was the practice of rejection, used to fight the spread of leper, the infected were exiled and located in a place where it was useless to differentiate among the mass. The second method was a practice of surveillance and observation, used to fight the plague, "the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies this is the utopia of the governed city".

Foucault statement is the following: "If it is true that leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, ..., then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects". I must disagree with parts of this statement as they seem rather radical, these two diseases sure shaped the history of the European continent but rituals of exclusion and disciplinary projects existed in some way also before them. Especially the rituals of exclusion are much older than not the disease itself as they are a part of the animal instinct in us, exiling the weak and sick that could not be a useful part of society anymore. The disciplinary projects also existed before the plague, on the other hand, the disease drastically changed the final goal of the projects, while before the plague they were meant to exclude and exile convicts, they now focus in observing and re-educating an individual to reintegrate him as a useful element of society.

In the disciplinary projects, shaped by this new mentality of surveillance, all forms of disorder and confusion were treated with the same methods the plague were treated. Bentham's Panopticon is one of the results of this disciplinary projects; the Panopticon consisted in a circular building divided into many cells with two windows for each of them, one on the outside to allow the light to cross the room and one on the intern courtyard in which middle and observing tower was placed.

"Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected; Visibility is a trap" (Foucault). With his statement, he wants to point out how the old and dark prisons of the past were more of a hiding place for convicts.

The Panopticon, instead, makes it possible to exercise power in a constant way reducing the number of those who exercise it and increasing the number of those on whom it is exercised; The constant feeling of being observed but not seeing the observer creates a sort of psychological pressure in the individuals preventing crimes, mistakes and offences even before they have been committed. Further on Bentham proposes the Panopticon, not only as an architectural model for the perfect prison but also as a model for experiments on men, he believes that whenever a group of individuals must be forced to learn a certain task or behaviour the panoptic schema may be used. Bentham is convinced that the Panopticon is able to increase the forces of power and simultaneously be able to increase the forces of society instead of confiscating them, calling it the "productive increase of power" that can only be assured if "It can be exercised continuously..., in the subtlest possible way, and if, ..., it functions outside these sudden, violent, discontinuous forms that are bound up with the exercise of sovereignty".

While at the time of Bentham the Panopticon has received rather little attention, compared to the scientific findings in the chemical or mining industries, and was considered a "bizarre little utopia, a perverse dream ... of a police society", it is not too far from the structure of modern society and so it became a very interesting tool that can be used to understand better the structure of it.

The digitalization made it possible to keep a much larger number of people under observation and to cut down the numbers of observants to its very lowest; But the digitalized Panopticon is far away from the utopic dream Bentham had, on one side it helps authorities to control a much larger range of individuals and to easily detect misbehaviour and criminal activities. On the other side the nature of the observant changed, it is not only authorities that use the panoptic scheme but also big companies as the ones that own social media or research tools of any kind; these companies have changed the structure of the Panopticon, observing and gathering data is not anymore used to strengthen the productivity of society but to categorize it in groups of interests, social position and political orientation in order to sell this information to other who may gain profit out of it. The observed shifted from being the producer, monitored in order to improve its productivity, to be the ultimate product. Society does not take any profit out of this scheme putting it in contrast to the principle of Bentham where the functions of power and society growth simultaneously.

But many are sceptical in calling the modern model of surveillance a panopticon as for example Jake Goldenfein who states in an article of the Guardian: "In the panopticon the occupants are constantly aware of the threat of being watched – this is the whole point – but state surveillance on the internet is invisible";

Or as Connor Sheridan writes in his senior thesis "The old panopticon required isolation and fragmentation to separate its captives from each other... in the modern panopticon, that sense of hard power is largely done away with. Now when the panoptic gaze is turned on a subject, it is to understand their needs and to serve their desires, only to catalogue those desires to later play back against them". These two statements, however, can be easily contrasted, the first one by Goldenfein himself who writes in the same article that we can consider the modern model of surveillance a panopticon from the moment of the Snowden scandal, even if society did know it where surveilled on the internet they now had certain proof.

And the second statement can be argued with the help of a very direct picture and citation from the article "Power of Panopticism in Modern Society" by Xinzu Zhang "However, all the methods that are achieved by panopticism are executed in social media. Panopticism contains the idea of being watched from a watchtower, ... People who use social media are also aware that they are being watched and, hence, avoid engaging in activities that go against the government's principles. Proof of being watched can be seen when people are arrested and charged for the illegal downloading of copyrighted material over the internet".

As we might have seen there are many different opinions when it comes to the question, is the modern model of surveillance a panopticon? On both sides we have valid points of position, the ones that agree with the statement are focusing on nonphysical similarities in the structure while the ones against it focus on the fact that the modern model lacks in the physical architectural components that defined the original panopticon.

Therefore to unite the different ways of thought we must say that the modern model of surveillance is not completely comparable to the Panopticon but can be seen as a model that functions in a panoptical scheme, a nonphysical entity that just follows the structure of the panopticon.

CONCLUSIONS

Many authors still argue if the modern structure of surveillance can be compared to the Bentham panopticon or not, but all of them agree with the fact that, in some way, the panoptic scheme is bounded into the structure of institutions and social media.

Therefore, it is possible to consider the digitalized panopticon as a nonphysical existing entity, which helps us to leave the previous debate in the background and focus on more contemporary topics. Foucault, for example, explains how the panopticon and other disciplinary projects arise after a pandemic as the plague or the leper; And this leads us to our question, what role will the COVID-19 pandemic play in the evolution of the panoptic scheme and is the panopticon the right tool to create a temporary utopian society capable of fighting the spread of the disease? It is used already under the form of tracking apps but with little success, so, could it be used also in a previous stage to avoid unauthorized gatherings.

LITERATURE

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