

Surveillance and Power

Michel Foucault was a highly influential French philosopher who addressed important issues regarding the relationship between knowledge and power. He also worked on how different institutions in society enforced social control. He is widely called post-structuralist and postmodernist but he often rejected these labels and preferred to present his theories as critical accounts of modern society.

One of his works *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* carefully analyses the mechanisms undertaken at prisons and related institutions that form the penal system in the modern age. He thinks that the rise of prisons as the most common means of punishing criminals has come with a changed society and other societal institutions resemble prisons. In this “carceral system”, institutions represent the power relations in society.

The concept of the panopticon, a type of building, is central to his theories. The panopticon is an institutional construct that allows a single person to observe the fellows of an institution without them being able to tell whether they are being surveyed or not. In this design, the inspection house is at the center from which everything in a perimeter can be observed. In this design, the fellows of the institution cannot determine whether they are under surveillance at a point of time or not, they must act like they're being observed every time of the day. This leads to a lot of behavioural changes.

It is easy to see the genius of the design and it has important psychological conclusions. I believe that the panopticon is a sort of psychological operation, where the intended targets are unaware that they are being conditioned. The people in the institution employ a form of “self-censorship” due to constantly being observed.

The thought starts with just stopping unwanted activities with an institution, but I think it becomes associated with the idea of an omnipotent and omnipresent God who knows all your thoughts. The sense of an all-seeing eye causes the inhibition of the exercise of natural and legal laws by threat of punishment. More often than not, it leads to the stifling of free expression. The clever part is that God (if one exists) can only punish you in the afterlife, while this threat of punishment is very real.

One could even say that it provides a self-fulfilling mechanism for regulation. This regulation leads to self-regulation by the people in the institution who are being surveyed. At the end, these institutions breed conformity to the point it becomes a norm.

Disciplinary power is not a form of a direct show of power or punishment, but is the exact opposite of it. It shows power through an apparatus. According to Foucault, the carceral system that the society has constructed has too many forms of surveillance and is not actually freedom. Some of these apparatuses are present because we allow them to be as they come with the promise of safety, like cameras in a public place.

A simple comparison between a school and prison can highlight some of the similarities between the two institutions. Although the level and severity of punishment varies greatly, it is important to see that the ideas of surveillance and punishment remain the exact same.

1. Many prisons mandate two hours of outdoors every day, most students in school get less than an hour of outdoors time in school hours – roughly maintaining the same ratio and **enforcing restriction of movement**.
2. Both schools and prisons are presented as a gateway to better things in life. Even prisons have to offer a certain number of courses these days. But these institutions are almost always **correctional in nature** and aim to **condition the inmates**/students.
3. **Constant surveillance** is always ensured. It offers the parents safety, like it does to free citizens of the state.

The general idea that knowledge and power go hand in hand is central to Foucault's work. Every type of knowledge creates a power relation, and this is inevitable. Surveillance is a method of mass information collection and this automatically gives more power to the government or whatever institution that possesses the knowledge. The panopticon is a symbol of modern society that shows how discipline and punishment work – it is a construct of power in action, according to Foucault.

Contrary to what we might believe, as societies become more and more sophisticated, it actually offers greater opportunity for mass surveillance and control. In modern society, the citizen is “free to make choices” but those choices are usually the norm because of the long time a person spends in these carceral institutions – schools, factories, hospitals, and prison.

A key observation is that any medium to exchange information naturally becomes a new medium to survey and to censor in this new age. It almost seems like that the function of the government is to expand itself wherever it can.

Therefore, it is not that surprising that great surveillance methods continue to exist and most of them are something we freely opt for. Julian Assange's book *Cypherpunks* presents his view on the freedom and future of the Internet and points out how companies like Google constitute the “greatest surveillance machine that ever existed” constantly tracking our location, our contacts and our lives. In this system, we aren't even victims of the system, we're practically willing collaborators.

Overall, Foucault presents a really important perspective on modern structures and society. He is inarguably one of the most important thinkers of his century.

References

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