The Panopticon under the Light of Politics and Technology
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Introduction

The contemporary world deals with sophisticated and complex technologies that shape human behavior. The technologies today influence people on how they interact with each other. Communication devices could connect multiple individuals together. Sophisticated vehicles could transport individuals from one place to another in a short period of time, in a long distance covered. Technologies today shape the post-modern consciousness; it continues to thrive into individuals in myriads of forms.

The forms of technological devices do not only take the form of the mainstream technology we use like our gadgets. One of the forms it takes is architectural. A sophisticated and complex architectural design embedded in a building can shape the individual consciousness of individuals. This form of architecture follows the function it was bestowed by the architect. The sophisticated and complex form of a building we refer as the Panopticon.

The Panopticon is an ingenious architectural structure that was popularized by Jeremy Bentham during the eighteenth century. Etymologically, Panopticon comes from two Greek words *"pan"* that means all and *"optic"* that means sight. The Panopticon is conceived by Jeremy Bentham to be a disciplinary tool for criminals. It functions as a tool of permanent surveillance of the prisoners. Michel Foucault saw the Panopticon as a technological instrument to shape the society.

The Plague

The preliminary paragraphs in Foucault's book titled *"Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison"* are descriptions of the how a seventeenth century town was infested with plagues. Foucault exposes the history of a plague stricken town during the seventeenth century wherein there was an order of primarily "a strict spatial partitioning."[1] The strict spatial partitioning was only the beginning of disciplinary actions taken for the prevention of spreading the plague. Foucault further on describes the order of the state to the common people that they were not allowed to have contact with each other, they were not allowed to go out from their house, they were not allowed to go out of town unless they asked permission from the syndic or the local magistrates. There were series of surveillances and

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[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* Translated from French by Alan Sheridan, (New York: Vintage Books 1977) 195.

inspections; the common people were monitored regularly. They had to follow the order or else be sentenced to death.

The continuous surveillance of the people, the regular recording of events and the strict monitoring of the syndics and magistrates somehow created a mechanism of discipline for the people. The setting somehow conditioned the consciousness of the common people. They were made to obey the order of the magistrates and syndics for their own good and protection. The order "constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism."[2] The setting wherein the people were made comfortable creates a setting of disciplining people.

The people were somehow disciplined by the order of the magistrates and syndics to avoid the spreading of the plague in the town. The plague was an avenue for people to be disciplined. "If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects."[3] Rulers then wanted to have power over the people through the plague phenomenon. The plague phenomenon was repeatedly been the banner of the rulers that insinuated fear, a system of discipline then arose from the plague phenomenon that was rooted in fear.

The Description and Function of the Panopticon

The Panopticon is unlike any other prison. Our modern day prison could be described as cages locking up animals. At some point animals in the zoo are more privileged than inmates in our local prisons. Our local prisons, instead of reforming delinquents, worsen their behavior. The behavior of people coming from the local prisons worsen rather than improve. The character of individuals then are more vicious than before they entered the prison; Foucault gives an exposition of Bentham's proposal for delinquents but further on does not only apply for delinquents but also for individuals in the society.

Like any other mainstream prison, the panopticon is situated at the periphery; it is isolated from civilization. It has an architectural structure of a circular building. At the center of the building is a tower, which has a window overlooking the window of the circular building. The building is divided into rooms, each room has two windows, one faces the tower and one, which faces the other side and keeps the room lighted. "All that is

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[2] Ibid, 197.
[3] Ibid, 198.

needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy.

The sophisticated technology of the panopticon is opposite to the mediaeval dungeon. A dungeon keeps prisoners from seeing the light of day to criminals. A multiple criminals are locked up in the dark undergrounds of dungeons that impede the passing of light. On the other hand, the panopticon operates as a technology that reveals individuals through surveillance. The individual is separated from each other, void of contact and imposed on his own individualism.

The panopticon imposes discipline through constant surveillance. Whenever an individual inside the technology of the panopticon is conscious that he is being monitored, he works with double effort. The panopticon is the best tool for all individuals in the society; be it criminals, workers or school children. It prevents criminals from influencing other criminals to rebel, it prevents workers to interact with other workers that will increase production, and it prevents school children from copying from one another and from making noise. Thus the panopticon is the perfect tool to discipline the society.

The collective individuals, individuals who form groups wherein these groups form myriads of societies are broken down. The panopticon destroys the multiplicity of groups; it reduces peoples of societies to societies of individuals. The panopticon breaks down peoples into individuals, individuals who are regularly monitored. The constant surveillance of each individual's function as the power of the institution as how Foucault puts it. This power wherein which the philosophy of Foucault focus and wherein which functions in the panopticon is not in the technological institution nor in the authority who manages the panopticon, it is within the individuals themselves.

"Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."[4] The panopticon trains individuals to think that they are being watched. The inmate is conditioned to think that he is being watched from the central tower because he is visible, nevertheless he is also conditioned to think that he's idea of him being watched is unverifiable. The inmate is visible to the tower but he can't verify whether he is being watched or not. We can say then that visibility is a trap.

Economy, State Politics and Education and the Principle of the Panopticon

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[4] Ibid, 201.

The panopticon is an architectural machine that can be used to discover effective means to discipline. To discipline a society is a difficult task. One should first abstract or deduce the society into individuals for easier management. To manage the society is to discipline individuals that can work for the progress of the economy, for better relations in politics and new discoveries in education. The panopticon offers a laboratory of experiments for the progress of each field and to discover a more efficient and effective way for individuals to function efficiently in the society.

The economy of a society either vitalizes or diminishes the social existence of a given society. Lethargic workers are curse to a company that strives to uplift the economy of the given society. When the panoptic principle is applied to the factory, changes will occur; disciplined workers will be individualized in their work area to increase the efficiency of labor. The panoptic principle applied in factories disciplines individuals increase power at the same time increase production. The more disciplined men, the more production and the more profit that will be gained.

One of the extensions of disciplinary institutions is the police institution. This police institution stemmed out from the sovereign institution that evolved into the political state institution. The police institutions are the ones carrying out the disciplinary power of magistrates to the society. The society is the receiver of the political power that is exercised through the police institutions. Police institutions as the extension of disciplinary power are given the capacity to monitor individuals in various places; it makes everyone visible to the eyes of the state and in turn remains incognito.

Disciplinarity is connected with the formation of various institutions that govern the society. One of the institutions that disciplinarity influenced is the educational institutions. The educational institutions were formed out of the disciplinary institutions of the past. The educational institution was inspired by the principle of the panopticon to educate individuals, when individuals are educated they become more productive members of the society. They could only be productive members of the society if they have undergone in the educational institution that propagates disciplinarity. School children perform in their chosen field through the practice of discipline that the educational institution provides.

A disciplined society comes out from disciplinary institutions. The above-mentioned fields namely: Economy, State Politics and Education are products of disciplinarity. These above-mentioned fields function only by the practice of discipline. This practice of discipline that is provided by the panoptic principle that makes people productive members of the society. Disciplinarity then is a form of power imbued in individuals.

Summary and Conclusion

The idea of Foucault on the continuous surveillance of individuals is imbedded in the technology of the panopticon. The panopticon deduces the society into a society of individuals. It is wholly the opposite of a dungeon wherein it allows visibility of inmates. Through constant surveillance, the inmate is conditioned to think that he is being watched but at the same time being taught to be uncertain that he is watched. Constant surveillance increases disciplinary power among individuals.

The panopticon is a form of disciplinary institution. Factories, Schools, Barracks, Hospitals, are extensions of the panopticon. These extensions of the disciplinary institution employ strict surveillance to its constituents. Individuals who are formed under these disciplinary institutions are being monitored, the monitoring of their activity instils in them disciplinary power which makes them more efficient and productive. The productivity and efficiency of individuals are goals of these disciplinary institutions.

Thus, the panopticon is a technological device that makes individuals who are adherents of the panopticon become productive and efficient members of the society. Disciplinary power is instilled in individuals through the panoptic principle. The idea of constant surveillance and individualization are ways to discipline people. The panoptic principle, which instils disciplinary power to individuals, inspired other institutions of disciplinarity like schools, hospitals and factories to function and make adherents productive and efficient. The Panopticon is a technological tool that has inspired disciplinary institutions to train individuals for socio-economic and political gains.

Sources:

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Translated from French by Alan Sheridan, (New York: Vintage Books 1977).