

# Foucault's Panopticism Revisited

## Effects of Panoptic Practices in Modern Prisons

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### Faculty Introduction

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Chelsi Lamberton's essay exemplifies the interdisciplinary turn within the humanities. Michel Foucault in general, and his work *Discipline and Punish* in particular, has been important in literary theory for years. Lamberton argues that Foucault remains relevant in the context of the modern day prison, and demonstrates that there is no theory without practice. Her well-researched critique of the dehumanizing potential of disciplinary efficiencies reminds us that humanity must be at the center of the humanities.

### Abstract

In his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault outlines the history of the penal system and analyzes how its methods of disciplinary power are integrated into larger parts of society. His theory of Panopticism is based on the Panopticon model created by Jeremy Bentham that used strict surveillance as a means of disciplinary control. This essay reviews Foucault's critique of the Panopticon and attempts to explain why Panoptic practices in modern prisons, such as heavy regulation and surveillance of inmates, do not reform criminal behavior. This essay argues that these practices have a negative impact on the psychological development of inmates, contribute to institutionalization, and lead to high rates of recidivism. Constant surveillance, along with being denied the right to make personal choices, strips autonomy and power away from inmates. This essay concludes that Panoptic practices have no place in modern prisons because they only seek to punish and contain inmates rather than deal with the underlying factors that contribute to criminal behavior.

Michel Foucault's work on the birth of the prison is regarded as one of the most influential sources in the criminal justice field. Renowned criminologist Stanley Cohen states that "to write about punishment and classification without Foucault is like talking about the unconscious without Freud" (Lacombe 332). In his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault outlines the history of the disciplinary function of coercive institutions and analyzes how they are deeply woven into larger parts of society. Foucault's theory of disciplinary power states that coercive institutions control not only those directly within them, but that their power of control flows outward and directly impacts other institutions in society (Foucault 161). At the center of these coercive institutions is the prison system, and thanks to Foucault, criminologists can better understand the history of the penal system as part of the broader history of the construction of power. Researchers credit Foucault for demonstrating how a system of "surveillance and work routines" (Yeung and Somashekhar 97) effectively regulates prison populations. Furthermore, Foucault's analysis of the history of punishment, its function in society, and the way it has failed and succeeded over time has transformed the conversation of correctional practices and reform. This paper reviews the structure and methods of the Panopticon and will explain how Panoptic practices in modern prisons contribute to the institutionalization of prisoners and high rates of recidivism by only seeking to punish and contain inmates rather than addressing risk factors that contribute to criminal behavior.

Since his work centered around the advent of the prison system itself, Foucault is most often cited in research that deals with the history and the beginning of the institution of incarceration. Specifically, his work on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon is important because it explains in detail how the physical makeup of prisons could affect their ability to establish disciplinary control. The Panopticon is an architectural model for prisons that was designed to maximize the visibility of inmates and minimize the visibility of prison guards (Foucault 200). To accomplish this, the Panopticon would use one surveillance tower at the center of a circular room with walls made of prison cells. These cells would only have two windows: one facing the tower and one on the opposite end of the cell to let in light. This meant that the guard tower would have a perpetual, direct line of sight into each single cell. Additionally, the use of backlighting would allow the person

within the tower to see out, but would not allow any person to see in (Foucault 200). This creates what Foucault calls “many small theaters” (Foucault 200) in which the prisoners are always in the spotlight and being observed by an omnipresent audience whose presence could be felt, but never truly seen. This constant feeling of surveillance is the key to the Panoptic model. By making surveillance permanent, the inmate is “induce[d]...[in] a state of conscious” that works to “assur[e] the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 201). In other words, the Panopticon is the ultimate architectural apparatus for disciplinary control because the permanency of visibility places the burden of the relationship of power on the prisoners themselves and deems the actual exercise of power unnecessary (Foucault 201).

Though Bentham’s Panopticon was originally proposed for prisons, Foucault says the model is in use in all institutions within society. He states that it has been used to “reform prisoners, but also treat patients, instruct schoolchildren, confine the insane, supervise workers, [and] put beggars and idlers to work” (Foucault 205). He described this as an effective way to establish authority and strengthen disciplinary control because the Panopticon’s reliance on a noncorporeal form of power and strong observational focus allowed for quick intervention and increased efficiency (Foucault 204). Specifically regarding correctional institutions and punishment, Foucault states that the Panopticon is able to control and contain prisoners without direct use of force. As opposed to using old punishment methods of public execution and torture that were carried out on prisoners’ bodies, Foucault sees in Panopticism a less violent and more efficient method that impacts the minds and behaviors of those incarcerated.

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Both Bentham and Foucault felt that close observation and surveillance would modify criminal behavior. They believed that creating the feeling of being watched by an authority figure at all times would gradually shift the way prisoners make decisions and behave. Additionally, the constant surveillance of the prisoners’ behavior meant that wrong actions could be corrected immediately. However, criminologists now understand that criminal behavior is much more

complicated than it appeared to be in the 1970s when Foucault's work on Panoptic practices was written. Criminal behavior can now be linked to certain risk factors that Panoptic practices do not address or attempt to resolve. Although Bentham's model has not been replicated and is not directly practiced in modern prisons, it is clear that there is a connection between the regulated routines and surveillance of prisoners today and the Panoptic framework of disciplinary control.

To understand the current workings of surveillance in modern prisons, it is important to first briefly examine how prisoners have historically been regulated and monitored while incarcerated. With the birth of prisons in the early nineteenth century came two models of incarceration that dealt directly with the concept of regulating and surveilling prisoners' actions. The first was the New York system, also referred to as the Auburn Plan, which allowed inmates to be among each other while they worked and went about their scheduled activities under the condition that they did not look at or speak with each other (Yeung and Somashekhar 33). This was also known as the silent model because any noise that was unnecessary—speaking, laughing, singing, or even accidental noise—was punishable. The second model of incarceration, called the Pennsylvania system, was centered on complete isolation and solitary confinement of each individual inmate (Yeung and Somashekhar 33). Prisoners each had individual cells in which they lived, ate, slept, and worked and were only allowed minimal communication with guards and other inmates.

While these systems did not fully mirror Bentham's original Panopticon, they did possess general principles of Panopticism that Foucault described. This comparison is explored in an article written by King-To Yeung and Mahesh Somashekar, which explains how the New York and Pennsylvania models coincided with the Panoptic model through sensory control and regulation. Their article, "Sensing Agency and Resistance in Old Prisons: A Pragmatist Analysis of Institutional Control," focuses on the ways that these models used Foucault's theory of disciplinary control not by directly surveilling prisoners, but by controlling their senses of sight and hearing, and heavily regulating their daily routines. For instance, in the New York system, inmates were required to "line up single file to clean their morning buckets and take their meals; they were not allowed to turn their heads...[.]they could not look directly at...prison authorities...

[and they had to] march with downcast eyes...forming a visibly moving chain” (Yeung and Somashekar 33). This is an example of establishing disciplinary control through visual order, which prison authorities believed was a crucial part of maintaining power over the inmates. Disciplinary control was also established through auditory cues, such as the sound of a bell that would signal the beginning and end of daily activities (Yeung and Somashekar 33). This method, which is still commonly used in modern prisons, effectively synchronizes prisoners’ movements and uses highly controlled regimens to reaffirm the Panopticon’s institutional control (Yeung and Somashekar 85).

Through the framework of Panopticism, the New York and Pennsylvania prison models created a new kind of disciplinary control that focused on controlling what the prisoners heard, saw, felt, and did every moment they were incarcerated. Yeung and Somashekar suggest that the heavily structured lives of prisoners resemble the constant feeling of being watched that was so crucial to the Panopticon. By not being able to make choices as simple as when they could make noise and by being denied the autonomy to create their own schedules, the New York and Pennsylvania models mirrored the Panopticon’s sense of an omnipresent authority.

The concept of surveillance through controlling and monitoring the routines of inmates is clearly represented in recent correctional practices. In a study conducted in 2006, Margaret E. Leigey and Michael A. Ryder asked inmates to identify which aspects of prison life were the most difficult to deal with. Among the choices given, respondents selected the conditions that affected their autonomy and ability to make everyday decisions such as what they eat, where they go, and how they are expected to behave (Leigey and Ryder 735). Referred to in this study as “little luxuries,” (Leigey and Ryder 735) the deprivation of things like multiple food options and limited access to privileges makes the prisoners feel as though they are “being squeezed” (Leigey and Ryder 736). Additionally, respondents in this study identified a lack of privacy as another factor that lowers their quality of life (Leigey and Ryder 735). This sample of inmates found this problem so severe that they equated the constant violation of their privacy to the feeling of being sexually assaulted (Leigey and Ryder 738). Being constantly surveilled, having no chance of solitude,

and being denied the basic privilege of making choices exemplifies how modern prisons use disciplinary control to keep prisoners powerless. Therefore, Panoptic practices in modern prisons are now represented through limited autonomy and the total regulation of inmates' lives.

The deprivation of autonomy and restricted ability to make choices is one of the five pains of imprisonment defined by Gresham Sykes in 1958 (Sykes 265). In this famous qualitative study, Sykes outlined the damaging effects of incarceration identified by inmates themselves. The method of micromanaging inmates' lives leads to a reduced self-image and loss of identity and ultimately works to dehumanize offenders while they are incarcerated. Also included in the deprivation of autonomy is the loss of inmates' right to receive information, from simple inconveniences like being told the mail is late but not being told the reason, to more important explanations such as why an inmate is being denied parole (Sykes 266). This is comparable to the practices of Panopticism in that the main function of the Panopticon is to strip prisoners of their subjectivity and make them merely an "object of information" (Foucault 200). The loss, or as Foucault puts it, the "separation" (Foucault 201) of individuality is crucial to the effectiveness of Panopticism because it establishes disciplinary power over each inmate specifically rather than seeking to control the entire inmate population.

When inmates enter correctional institutions, they are expected to give up their autonomy and their right to make decisions for themselves. This sudden change requires drastic methods of adaptation. Institutionalization refers to the process by which inmates' habits of thinking, feeling, and acting are shaped and transformed as they adapt to the demands of prison life (Haney). Also sometimes referred to as *prisonization* to address correctional settings specifically, this term is an umbrella under which the negative psychological effects of coping with harsh conditions of incarceration are defined (Haney). In the beginning of their sentence, inmates understandably have a hard time living under the harsh regulations and routines that they are forced to follow. However, as time goes on, they become more accustomed to the structure of institutional life (Haney). Some inmates even become dependent on having their choices made for them, and when they are released back into society, they often have a hard time rediscovering

their autonomy. Since correctional officers force inmates to adapt to their environment through punishment and constant surveillance, this loss of identity becomes internalized and can sometimes remain long after their sentence is over. This is problematic because these offenders can no longer cope with responsibility, do not have the skills to properly reintegrate into their communities, and often end up becoming reincarcerated (Haney). Panoptic practices therefore contribute to institutionalizing prisoners by purposefully denying them the tools necessary to maintain their personhood throughout their time spent incarcerated. In other words, the system of “omnipresent surveillance” (Foucault 214) necessary in Panopticism is now presented in the continuous regulating and monitoring of not only inmates’ bodies, but also their routines.

While heavily regulating their routines is helpful in controlling prison populations, it has the potential to negatively impact inmates’ psychological development and prevent them from being able to effectively reintegrate into society. The goal of Panopticism and most modern prisons to assert disciplinary power over inmates through strict regulations and careful surveillance does nothing to rehabilitate offenders and also does nothing to combat causes of crime. It is estimated that within five years of their original arrest, seventy-six percent of offenders are reincarcerated (National Institute of Justice).

A large contributing factor to these high rates of recidivism is that incarceration only serves to punish offenders rather than reform them.

Unless risk factors of criminal behavior such as substance or alcohol abuse, criminal peer groups, past employment, education level,

and financial circumstances are addressed, offender behavior will not change (Austin 197). Practices of surveillance, regulation, and control are therefore not enough to positively impact criminal behavior and reduce the amount of crime in society. In fact, certain methods of Panopticism, such as stripping inmates of autonomy, compound the problems associated with recidivism by damaging inmates’ ability to make choices for themselves after they are released. In other words, the Panoptic model perpetuates the continuation of criminal behavior by ignoring causes of crime and only seeking to discipline offenders.

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According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, ninety-five percent of inmates are eventually released back into society. Therefore, it is crucial that the time they spend incarcerated addresses the risk factors that contribute to criminal behavior rather than simply serve as a punishment.

Foucault states that the Panopticon provided the perfect opportunity to conduct behavioral research since there was a sample population readily available. His perspective of research in correctional institutions does not focus so much on inmate cooperation or response, but rather on observing the inmates in a highly-controlled environment. In fact, he states that the Panopticon is a “mechanism of observation” (Foucault 204) and that by using its methods of total surveillance, researchers gain “efficiency...in the ability to penetrate into men’s behavior” (Foucault 204). However, he also recognized the dangers of conducting studies without consent from inmates or even against their will. With the power of observation so readily available in the Panopticon model, it is too easy for prisoners to be seen as data sets rather than actual people. It also represents how subjects of the Panopticon easily lose their personhood due to the purposeful stripping of their individuality. Not only is this an ethical issue, but it could also contribute to the problems associated with the validity of research conducted within correctional institutions. Mainly, this approach can only evaluate how inmates behave in a controlled institution. It cannot address the more crucial issue of how prison regulations affect inmates after they are released into society.

Foucault’s work on the Panopticon reveals how the disciplinary power of coercive institutions can affect those within them, and the issues outlined in his critique are still prevalent in prison systems today. Mainly, the Panoptic practice of denying inmates privacy and keeping them under constant surveillance is seen in prisons through the heavy regulations and strict schedules that inmates must follow (Leigey and Ryder 735). The lack of choice, and the denial of prisoners’ right to individual autonomy, contributes to a loss of self-identity, which in turn contributes to the problem of institutionalization and high rates of recidivism (Haney; Bureau of Justice Statistics). With high levels of mass incarceration, and an increase of prison populations, prisoners are even more at risk of being affected by these negative factors of Panoptic practices (Bureau of Justice Statistics). The “ripple effects”



(Clear and Frost 149) of high rates of incarceration affect not only individuals, but also their neighborhoods and communities. The negative impacts to the individual inmate include separation from their partners, reducing job opportunities, lower job wages, and weaker relationships with family members (Clear and Frost 149). When these individuals are released, their lack of support and opportunities lessen their ability to contribute to their communities (Clear and Frost 151). To avoid these consequences, correctional institutions should rethink their approach in dealing with offenders. If the only goal is to discipline and punish prisoners, then true reform of their criminal behavior will never be accomplished. Therefore, Foucault's analysis of Panopticism as a means of disciplinary control in society should be used to guide the future of incarceration away from Panoptic practices. If the goal remains simply to lock away offenders to punish them, then the Panopticon model will suffice. However, if correctional institutions seek to reform offenders and effect positive change in society, Foucault's critiques of Panoptic practices should be considered in order to implement more humane methods of incarceration. ■

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### ***Student Biography***

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Chelsi Lamberton is a senior with a double major in English and Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University. She is the event coordinator of the French club and is also an active member of the English honor society, Sigma Tau Delta. After Lamberton was assigned a research project on Michel Foucault’s theories on prison systems in an English course, she was inspired to conduct further research on the topic under the guidance of Dr. Murfin, a professor in the Department of English. Lamberton will graduate in spring 2018 and plans on pursuing graduate studies in Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University. She hopes to continue her research on issues related to prison reform while in graduate school.