

To what extent is the Panopticon a suitable analogy for power?

Written by Cedric Cordenier

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CEDRIC CORDENIER, MAR 2 2011

Most accounts of power, such as those put forward by Dahl, Bachrach and Baratz, and even Steven Lukes emphasise the causal nature of power—A affects the actions or interests of B, or prevents the actions of B through non-decision (Lukes 30). Michel Foucault's account of power is a radical departure from these accounts. He conceives of power in relational terms: power is understood in terms of the relations between institutions, or indeed, between groups more generally, be they social, economic, political or otherwise (Danaher et al., 71). Power is pervasive; it belongs to no-one. Its main medium of control is surveillance. This is the power that is represented in Bentham's Panopticon. This essay will enquire whether or not Bentham's Panoptic device is a suitable analogy for power, focusing in particular on Foucault's conception of power. Thus it will proceed in three stages. It will first seek to map out the Panoptic device according to Bentham and Foucault. It will then discuss the three principal characteristics of the Foucauldian conception of power—its omnipresence and visibility, its individualising and totalising power, and its diffusion, concluding with a brief discussion of whether Foucault's panopticon exhaustively encompasses the power "ideal-type."

The Panoptic device is a ring-shaped building with a watchtower at its centre. Each floor of the ring-shaped building is divided into cells of equal size; each contains two windows through which light can penetrate thus illuminating the cell, giving perfect visibility to whomever lies in the watchtower. Shutters prevent those in the cells from knowing whether the watchtower is occupied. Those in cells cannot see the occupants of the watchtower; nor, because each is in a discrete cell separated by a wall, can they see the other inmates. In short, the inmate "is seen, but he does not see" (Foucault 200; Miller 3). Power is visible because of the omnipresence of the watchtower, and unverifiable, because it is impossible for the inmate to know when he is being watched. As such, the inmates come to exercise self-restraint. Because it does not matter who occupies the watchtower, or even whether it is occupied, power belongs to no-one; it functions automatically and is constantly present through the piercing gaze of the watchtower (Foucault 201–203). The Panopticon is an instrument of economical surveillance—the very few bear a constant, watchful eye on the every movement of the many.

In the first place, the Panopticon is a suitable analogy of Foucault's conception of power because it reflects its omnipresence and visibility. The watchtower is of central importance here. It sees all, but is also seen. The watchtower is the predominant mechanism by which power is made to impregnate and transcend the individual. Indeed, it is the watchtower that assures the automatic functioning of power serving as it does to constantly impress on the individual a feeling of being watched (Foucault 201). This surveillance needs to be visible, or at the very least we must be aware of it since awareness of the "gaze" assures it functioning and constrains the inmate to become the "principle of his own subjection" (203). As such, the "gaze" of the Panopticon is closely tied to Foucault's notion of power-knowledge, and alludes to it. The power-knowledge relationship does not imply that power and knowledge are synonymous, rather it suggests that power is both a cause and an effect of knowledge (Digeser 986). The idea that knowledge precedes power can be applied to the Panopticon and in particular to the awareness of the "gaze" of the central watchtower. Thus the functioning of power depends on the knowledge that the watchtower is the place where the guards reside. In contrast, the idea that power precedes knowledge does not seem to be contained within the Panoptic device, and this is a sense in which the Panopticon is not a satisfactory analogy for Foucault's conception of power.

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The second half of the power-knowledge relationship implies that power is productive of knowledge (987). Knowledge, on this account, can neither be objective nor guaranteed, since power produces the knowledge that is necessary to uphold norms (Digeser 988). It creates within society a divide between the “normal” and the “abnormal” through dichotomies such as sick/healthy or sane/insane. Hence the idea that “madness,” and in particular the criteria that serve to judge whether someone is mad or not, is produced by the state—it does not just exist (Danaher et al., 26). Foucault’s notion of “biopower,” which Rabinow and Rose suggest contains two poles—one focusing on the “anatomo- politics of the human body, seeking to maximize its forces and integrate it into efficient systems” and the other focusing on the population as a whole, seeking to ensure health, to limit mortality, increase longevity; to produce, in short, an efficient, healthy and able workforce—is the means by which this knowledge is put into effect (196). The central point of biopower is that whilst it does lead to the production of knowledge—which is one-half of the power-knowledge relationship—it also leads to classification, that is, the application of disciplinary power, through the knowledge produced (Danaher et al., 26). Indeed, knowledge of, for example, the symptoms that indicate depression, madness, or any disease in general, provides a basis for justifying the removal of those people with the corresponding symptoms from the public sphere of society to the “niche,” remote space within society of the asylum or the hospital.

The Panopticon is also suitable as an analogy for Foucault’s conception of power because it contains this notion of biopower. Indeed, the notion of biopower is essential because it analogises the Panopticon as an individualising and totalising device. Individualising—just as the discrete cells of the Panopticon, and the invisibility of each inmate to the others creates a “collection of separated individualities,” so the knowledge produced by biopower can identify from without the masses those who do not “fit in.” Totalising—just as the central position of the watchtower permits a constant observation of all cells, all inmates, at any given time, so biopower can classify, separating the normal from the abnormal, bringing “all aspects of life under its ‘gaze’ and [prodding] the thoughts, beliefs, actions, morals, and desires of individuals toward a norm of what is acceptable” (Digeser 993; Foucault 201). For it is through classification that the Panopticon reforms rather than punishes, corrects rather than reprimands. Foucault recognises the power of classification: “Classification is sanction. If you are well classified, there is reward. But if you are not well classified, there is punishment” (*Michel Foucault par lui-meme*).

Some critics such as Nick Crossley have suggested that a critical flaw in the use of the Panopticon as an analogy of the Foucauldian conception of power is that it is not obvious why the “gaze” produced by the central watchtower should have the effect of making the inmate the “principle of his own subjection” (Foucault 203). Crossley goes on to suggest that the “gaze” achieves its regulating effect because the inmate is “objectified in the gaze of the other”—there is a refusal to communicate on the part of the other. As a result, the inmate is alienated, and loses his sense of self. He no longer belongs to himself, but to the other: his actions and experiences take on a meaning and significance for the other that the inmate cannot understand (407–408; 414). Yet it is through the mechanism of classification, which arises from Foucault’s biopower, that this process of alienation occurs, such that it is nevertheless possible to suggest that classification may serve to explain the regulating power and effect of the “gaze.” Indeed, the inmate of the Panopticon is under constant threat of classification. In a prison, conformity to social norms and values leads to the prospect of parole. In an asylum, to the prospect of release. In a workhouse, to the prospect of promotion. Continued refusal to conform, to sanction. The “gaze” is given effect, in short, because the process of classification that is central to the exercise of disciplinary power occurs through it.

The pressure of the “gaze” on the individual to self-regulate, to align to certain norms and standards is, after all, the primary effect of the Panopticon. Thus one of the effects of Foucauldian power is that it produces the subject and the “self” (Danaher et al., 116). It is on this point that Crossley identifies yet another inconsistency in the Panoptic analogy, namely that the effect of the “gaze” depends on the existence of a prior subject. Indeed, the Panoptic device achieves its regulating and controlling effect because it impresses on the inmate an awareness of being watched (405). But this is not an inconsistency per se because Foucault’s power is a constant within society—omnipresent, diffuse and never idle. As such, there can be no genesis of the self, only constant recreation and reinvention. The individual and the self are the product of society and its embedded power relations.

There is nevertheless one area in which the Panopticon *appears* to be wholly incompatible with the Foucauldian conception of power; this is the area in which Foucault considers power to be diffuse. The problem here is that the

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watchtower implies that power emanates from it; the “gaze,” in other words, is site-based. This is the point argued by Neve Gordon, who goes on to suggest that the cubicle may be a more accurate representation of Foucault’s power. Because cubicles have no doors, because their walls do not isolate completely, often failing to reach to the ceiling, and because the worker’s back is facing the entry, the “worker is never sure who might pass by the open entrance. Similar to the Panopticon, the perpetual visibility of the employee is sufficient to render most workers docile” (130). Gordon’s critique of the Panopticon, however, seems less strong if we consider the watchtower not as the locus of power, but as the index of the hierarchical structure of power. Within the Panoptic device, the watchtower is not the actual source of power since the regulating power of the Panopticon transcends the individual. If the self is made to conform to certain norms and standards because of surveillance, it is because the “gaze” acts on the individual inmate. The inmates, rather than the the watchtower, are the loci of power.

The same critique has been levelled by Jean-Gabriel Ganascia, who goes on to propose the model of the “Catopticon,” though for different reasons. He rejects the Foucauldian line which argues for the emergence of a society dominated solely by surveillance—the word is derived from the French *veiller*, to watch and the prefix *sur-*, above, implying that surveillance is carried out from above—and suggests that we are seeing the emergence of society dominated by *sousveillance*, characterised by situations where “the watchers are placed under the watched,” and *equivoillance*, where everyone watches everyone else (2–3). On this account, the Panopticon is not suitable as an analogy for power because of any fault of internal logic, but rather because it fails to accurately represent the workings of power in contemporary society. The Catopticon is a modified version of the Panopticon, designed to represent the phenomena of *sousveillance* and *equivoillance*. Instead of the central watchtower, there is a mirror-tower that enables everyone to communicate with everyone else. There is no hierarchy. Rather than the asymmetrical relations present in the Panopticon, the Catopticon has a “fundamental symmetry, which gives everybody the ability to watch—and consequently to control—everybody” (Ganascia 6). Of importance here is that Ganascia is not suggesting that the Panopticon is a defunct model. It is, rather, an incomplete one. Thus, “from a strict logical point of view, the study of Catopticon shows that nothing prohibits the coexistence of Catopticon with multiple Panopticon and the future subsistence of Panopticon in the 21st century” (10).

Whilst it is important to remember that Foucault’s conception of power does not fit into the commonly assumed framework of power—which include the notion of causality and agency as its principal characteristics—this does not mean that both conceptions of power are mutually excluding. The “atomic” conceptions of power put forward by theorists such as Dahl and Lukes are, in fact, encompassed by the broader Foucauldian conception (Barry 104–106). Indeed, the Panopticon portends to shape the “self” in such a way that the exercise of more visible forms of power can be avoided. But the mechanism of classification mentioned previously assumes the existence of agents—the police, doctors or judges—whose purpose it is to rectify the infringement of norms and standards. Thus the act of classification which is alluded to in the Panoptic device is compatible with micro-level theories of power. In the context of enforcement of power, the formula: “A has power over B if A affects the interests or actions of B,” is applicable. Yet the power possessed by the agents is transitory and as such does not belong to them—it results from their occupation. Furthermore, the agents themselves are subject to power—obviously by their hierarchical superiors and subtly by the imposition of normative behaviour. It is in this sense as well that power is diffuse as no *absolute* relationship of power can be drawn between members of society; only relative relationships exist. Bentham’s Panoptic device, with its provision to remain open to the public, such that the “eye of the public will watch over the inner eye,” reflects this notion whereby society is composed of an infinitely large number of hierarchical relationships of power, but no dominant one, such that power results from the relationship itself rather than any agent (Miller 9). In the sense that it includes these micro-level theories of power—which contain formulas of the kind: “A has power over B if A . . . B”—it is exhaustive as a power “ideal-type.”

Bentham’s Panopticon is, on the whole, a suitable analogy for Michel Foucault’s conception of power. It encompasses the essence of Foucault’s work on power, though it does not represent it in its entirety. Nevertheless, there are two main reasons for doubting the suitability of the Panopticon as an analogy for Foucauldian power. The first concerns his notion of power-knowledge, which the Panopticon does not contain entirely, alluding only to one part of the relationship—the idea that knowledge is an antecedent of power and its use. The model does not account for the generation of knowledge as a result of power; it only contains the use of that knowledge through biopower to give the “gaze” its regulating and controlling effect. The second point concerns Foucauldian power as an exhaustive

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representation of the power “ideal-type.” Though it includes micro-level theories of power, it fails to satisfactorily reflect all types of power at the level of society. This is the critique of Ganascia, who suggests that Foucault’s emphasis on the hierarchical nature of surveillance is flawed. Any account of power should consider surveillance more generally—from above, but also from the same level as well as from below.

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