Foucault and everyday security: lessons from the panopticon

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Abstract

Foucault's concepts and ideas (surveillance, discipline, governmentality, bio-power and discourse) have gained renewed interest in the post-9/11 environment. Yet this renewed interest has emphasised the role of the state and state apparatuses in politics in contradiction to Foucault's project of locating power below the state. This paper re-reads Foucault's writings on the panopticon in order to intervene into contemporary surveillance studies and in doing so to offer a program for researching everyday security.

Beyond the limits of the state

Within the post-9/11 security environment many of Foucault's concepts – surveillance, discipline, regulation, the biopolitics of population, discourses of security, governmentality – and indeed his critical energy have gained new relevance. For the sake of brevity I will not detail this voluminous literature. What I do note, however, is that within this critical scholarship in the humanities we see the re-emergence of a focus on the power of the state and state apparatuses (particularly the media) in contradiction to Foucault's own understanding of power.

To be fair, the introduction of anti-terror laws (including the resurfacing of notions of 'treason'), the heightened border security and surveillance regimes, the 'war on terror' waged in the Middle East and the public concern with foreign policy practically begs the sort of critical scholarship that would hold our governments and media accountable for their actions and depictions. Furthermore, Foucault's work on governmentality and the techniques of government, his book *Discipline and punish* (1977) with its sweeping history of penal systems, and his attention to the biopolitics of population lends itself quite readily to these sorts of critiques. This scholarship has contributed much to the critique of the war on terror and continuously provokes us to question the framing of politics in society.

Nevertheless, these uses of Foucault seem to be in contradiction to Foucault's own aversion to state-focused criticisms, which recall more of his teacher Althusser than of Foucault's corpus of work. As Foucault argued during an interview published as the preface to the 1977 French edition of Jeremy Bentham's *Le panoptique*:

> One impoverishes the question of power if one poses it solely in terms of legislation and constitution, in terms solely of the state and the state apparatus. Power is quite different from and more complicated, dense and pervasive than a set of laws or a state apparatus (Foucault 1980, p. 158).

In another interview in 1977, Foucault reinforced the point:

> I don't want to say that the State isn't important; what I want to say is that relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the State … The State is

superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth.

(Foucault 1980, p. 122)

Keeping this in mind, I turn to arguments in contemporary surveillance studies that suggest the panoptic society is no longer relevant.

The post-panoptical society? Mathiesen, Haggerty and Ericson

Both interviews were largely framed by the publication of Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* in 1975 where he examined Jeremy Bentham's panopticon as an architectural diagram for what Foucault described as the 'disciplinary society'. I am presuming that my esteemed colleagues are well acquainted (if not to death) with Bentham's panopticon as described in *Discipline and punish* so I will dispense with the summary of the architecture. In recent years we have seen the emergence of what some are calling 'post-panopticism' in surveillance studies literature. The authors in David Lyon's edited collection *Theorizing surveillance: the panopticon and beyond* suggest a consensus among surveillance studies scholars that Foucault's panopticon is no longer relevant. This consensus is buoyed by two influential articles.

Thomas Mathiesen's 1997 article 'The viewer society: Michel Foucault's "panopticon" revisited' is well cited in this post-panopticism literature. Mathiesen began by noting three intentions of Foucault's *Discipline and punish*. First, Foucault said something about the change in the nature of punishment (from torture to imprisonment); secondly, about the change in the content of punishment (from body to soul); and third, about a broader change in the social order (Mathiesen 1997, pp. 216–217). So far so good, but with this third point Mathiesen, focusing on the panopticon, suggested that this broad social change was a movement '*from the situation where the many see the few to the situation where the few see the many*' (p. 217, emphasis in original). Consequently, Mathiesen contended, Foucault failed to take account of the rise of the spectacle in mass-mediated societies where the many watch the few, for which Mathiesen coins the term 'synopticism'.

More recently, sociologists in surveillance studies have joined these critiques with a re-evaluation of contemporary technologies, representing a theoretical turn towards Latourian

and Deleuzian analyses, which supposedly 'highlight the disparate arrays of people, technologies and organizations which become connected to make "surveillance assemblages", in contrast to the static, unidirectional Panopticon metaphor' (Ball 2006, p. 300). At the forefront of this theoretical turn in surveillance studies has been Haggerty and Ericson's article 'The surveillant assemblage' (2000). According to Haggerty and Ericson, Foucault's panopticon improved upon Orwell's Big Brother by reminding us that the proletariat have long been the subject of intense scrutiny and by situating surveillance in the context of a theory of power. Yet, they argue, 'rapid technological developments, particularly the rise of computerized databases, require us to rethink the panoptic metaphor' (2000, p. 607). Echoing Mathiesen, they point out that in both Orwell and Foucault surveillance is a regime where the many watch the few in top-down scrutiny. In order to move away from Orwell and Foucault, they draw on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the 'assemblage' to produce what they call the 'surveillant assemblage', which works by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings into discrete data flows that are later reassembled into data doubles.

While I have much sympathy for this notion of the surveillant assemblage, I think Mathiesen's and Haggerty and Ericson's disregard for Foucault is rather hasty. My disagreement rests on the fact that such theorists often fail to recognise the role of the panopticon in Foucault's theory of power as explicated in *Discipline and punish* (1977) and following interviews. It should be remembered that the panopticon really only appears in one of the eleven chapters in *Discipline and punish*, significantly titled 'panopticism', which indicates that Foucault was interested in something abstracted from the panopticon rather than the panopticon itself.

Re-reading the panopticon: the microphysics of power

In the introduction of *Discipline and punish* Foucault outlined his general project as:

> A correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge; a genealogy of the present scientifico-legal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases, justifications and rules, from which it extends its effects and by which it masks its exorbitant singularity. (1977, p. 23)

He then detailed his methodology, which led to an analysis of the history of punishment and penal law as a history of the concrete systems of punishment that work in and on a political economy of the body, which would lay bare the 'micro-physics of power' (p. 26). Reflecting back on this methodology, Foucault later commented that this approach 'detach[es] power with its techniques and procedures from the form of law within which it has been theoretically confined up until now' (1980, p. 123).

It is within the context of this microphysics of power that we should situate his analysis of the panopticon. It is true that Foucault describes Jeremy Bentham's panopticon as a penal building of surveillance, in which, as Foucault put it pithily, 'Visibility is a trap' (1977, p. 200). Quotations taken out of context can seem to emphasise the role of the gaze. In one interview Foucault said that Bentham

> poses the problem of visibility, but thinks of a visibility organised around a dominating, overseeing gaze. He effects the project of a universal visibility which exists to serve a rigorous, meticulous power … an 'all-seeing' power. (1980, p. 152)

But it is a grave mistake, which Haggerty and Ericson make, to presume that this is an extension of Orwell's Big Brother and thus an instance of the power of the state through an omniscient gaze. As Foucault argued, 'the major effect of the Panopticon' was 'to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power' (1977, p. 201). As Foucault pointed out there is no need for the inmates to be actually watched; what was important was that they did not know when they were being watched. The result was the internalisation or interiorisation of the watch tower's gaze, such that the prisoner became his own overseer. Thus, Foucault concluded, 'it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so' (p. 201).

Far from being a 'static, unidirectional metaphor' as Kristie Ball (2006, p. 300) contends, Foucault's panopticon is an analysis of the functioning of power through the ingenious use of surveillance in which even the inspector is caught (1977, p. 204). Unidirectionality is only evident if one views it from the perspective of the repression of inmates by their prison

guards. I concede that Foucault does note the dissymmetry of relations of seeing: 'in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen' (p. 202). However, Foucault's point in this quotation is that the panopticon is a machine that effectuates the dissociation of the seeing–being seen dyad (pp. 201–202). If one views the panopticon, as Foucault did, as a machine of power in which everyone is caught rather than a machine of the gaze, one has a very different understanding of the panopticon. Although Foucault wrote and spoke incessantly about visibility and the gaze, this should not be taken as an analysis of the gaze, but *an analysis of power through the use of the gaze*. In short, the gaze is only important here insofar as it is a concrete mechanism through which power is exercised. Yet the principle of the panopticon is not the gaze but the automatisation and disindividualisation of power. It is from this perspective that Foucault concluded that power 'has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up' (p. 202).

We see then that Foucault's analysis of the panopticon is clearly part of his much larger project to understand the microphysics of power. As he puts it, 'the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form … it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use' (1977, p. 205). Insofar as Foucault is interested in the functioning of power within a given concrete assemblage we see that his actual target is panopticism rather than the panopticon itself. Jeremy Bentham's panopticon is a penal building. Foucault's panopticon is a machine of power that is generalisable across extra-penal domains (p. 205).

Conclusion

To conclude, despite Haggerty and Ericson's allusion to Foucault's theory of power it is clear that they have misinterpreted it when they suggest that Foucault's panopticon could be read as an extension of Orwell's Big Brother. Similarly, Mathiesen makes the mistake of fetishising the power of the gaze and failing to see how the gaze is only a mechanism of power within certain concrete assemblages. Both make the mistake of presuming the gaze to be unidirectional, both make the mistake of presuming the gaze to have an inherent power and, importantly, both reinstate a sovereign subject behind power. Far from moving 'beyond Foucault' their conception of power is decidedly pre-Foucault. In emphasising the power of

vision in Foucault, they miss Foucault's vision of power. The question it seems to me is not whether we are a post-panoptical society, but whether 'the microphysics of power' is no longer conceptually useful.

To bring this back to everyday security, what struck me most in the post-9/11 environment was not the government and media responses; after all, government lies and distortions and media moral panics are hardly new phenomena. What struck me instead was the willingness displayed by the public to return to a McCarthy era of suspicion, a willingness in which the public believed paradoxically that civil liberties, like the phoenix, would rise from the ashes of its own demise. What if the post-9/11 environment were not simply the result of government and media lies, distortions and cover-ups? What if the post-9/11 security environment were not the result of the machinations of states and state apparatuses, but rather the workings of power from below? I suggest we would need to analyse security not at the level of the state, but how the state is invested in a whole series of power relations in the everyday. We would need to trace out how it emerges, not from legislation, but from a shift in public consciousness effectuated by a host of 'local knowledges' around home safety and security, accident prevention and child protection. We would need to show, as Zizek (2002) has, that security consciousness was also enabled by a media and entertainment industry that constantly fantasised the disaster. We would need in other words to study the microphysics of power to show how security is enabled precisely by being invested in the family, kinship, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, technologies, bodies, computers, sexualities, the home and so on, so that we may better understand why people, and surveillance scholars, remain so invested in the illusion of state power.

There are perhaps many reasons why one might want to go beyond Foucault. His inability to explain the mechanisms for the interiorisation of the gaze through which we become docile subjects remains one of the overriding questions that we ask ourselves today (Butler 1997). Whatever the case, if we want to leave Foucault to rest we would need more than what Mathiesen and Haggerty and Ericson argue. It is tragically ironic that at that very moment that we seek to displace the all-seeing eye of power (as in Orwell's Big Brother) surveillance scholars turn their backs on Foucault, who devoted his life to struggling for a philosophical framework that displaced the sovereign subject behind power. It is tragic in other words that Foucault is criticised for precisely what he was trying to tell us all along.

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