**Panopticism**

**Summary**

Foucault begins with a description of measures to be taken against the plague in the seventeenth century: partitioning of space and closing off houses, constant inspection and registration. Processes of quarantine and purification operate. The plague is met by order. Lepers were also separated from society, but the aim behind this was to create a pure community. The plague measures aim at a disciplined community. The plague stands as an image against which the idea of discipline was created. The existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring and supervising abnormal beings brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms created by the fear of the plague. All modern mechanisms for controlling abnormal individuals derive from these.







Foucault then discusses Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a building with a tower at the center from which it is possible to see each cell in which a prisoner or schoolboy is incarcerated. Visibility is a trap. Each individual is seen but cannot communicate with the warders or other prisoners. The crowd is abolished. The panopticon induces a sense of permanent visibility that ensures the functioning of power. Bentham decreed that power should be visible yet unverifiable. The prisoner can always see the tower but never knows from where he is being observed.

The possibility that the panopticon is based on the royal menagerie at Versailles is raised. The Panopticon allows on to do the work of a naturalist: drawing up tables and taxonomies. It is also a laboratory of power, in which experiments are carried out on prisoners and staff. The plague-stricken town and the panopticon represent transformations of the disciplinary programme. The first case is an exceptional situation, where power is mobilized against an extraordinary evil. The second is a generalized model of human functioning, a way of defining power relations in everyday life. The Panopticon is not a dream building, but a diagram of power reduced to its ideal form. It perfects the operations of power by increasing the number of people who can be controlled, and decreasing the number needed to operate it. It gives power over people's minds through architecture. As it can be inspected from outside, there is no danger of tyranny.

The panopticon was destined to spread throughout society. It makes power more economic and effective. It does this to develop the economy, spread education and improve public morality, not to save society. The panopticon represents the subordination of bodies that increases the utility of power while dispensing with the need for a prince. Bentham develops the idea that disciplines could be dispersed throughout society. He provides a formula for the functioning of a society that is penetrated by disciplinary mechanisms. There are two images of discipline: one) the discipline blockade—an exceptional enclosed space on the edge of society; and two) the discipline-mechanism—a functional mechanism to make power operate more efficiently.

The move from one to the other represents the formation in the seventeenth and eighteenth century of a disciplinary society. Other increasingly profound processes operated: one) the functional inversion of disciplines; two) the swarming of disciplinary mechanisms; mechanisms begin to circulate openly in society, and are broken down into flexible methods of control; three) the state control of discipline, as in the formation of a central police power.

We can talk of the formation of a disciplinary society in the movement from enclosed disciplines to an infinitely extendible "panopticism". The formation of a disciplinary society is connected to several historical processes: one) disciplines are techniques of assuring the ordering of human masses that elaborate tactics of power that operate economically and invisibly. These tactics aim to increase the docility and utility of all elements of the system. This corresponds to a population increase, and a rise in the numbers to be supervised. The development of a capitalist economy led to a situation where these techniques could be operated in diverse regimes. Two) the panoptic modality of power is not independent. The disciplines and panopticism are the reverse of a process by which rights are guaranteed. The Enlightenment, which invented the liberties, also invented the disciplines. Three) what is new in the eighteenth century is the combination of disciplinary techniques. This occurred within a development of other technologies. The eighteenth century invented the examination, just as the middle-ages invented the judicial inquisition; much of modern penal techniques reveal the penetration of the examination into the inquisition.







The extreme of ancien regime penality was the dismemberment of the convict's body: the ideal position of modern penality is the indefinite examination. It is no surprise that the cellular, observational prison is the modern penal instrument, or that prisons resemble factories, schools and hospitals.

**Analysis**

In many ways, this is the heart of the book. For Foucault, the panopticon represents the way in which discipline and punishment work in modern society. It is a diagram of power in action because by looking at a plan of the panopticon, one realizes how the processes of observation and examination operate.

The panopticon is introduced through a contrast, a typical Foucault device (think of the contrast between the execution and the timetable). The plague is an interesting case, however. Firstly, Foucault examines a text about plague measures, rather than an account of an actual plague. To him, this is unimportant because texts and reality interact closely. One might ask why the plague acted as an image against which the mechanisms of discipline were defined. It was not because the plague represents a loss of order: the restoration of order was the aim of rituals such as the public execution. Rather, it was because when plague strikes, the boundaries of normal and abnormal are blurred. Anyone can become sick, and therefore abnormal; and what is abnormal is particularly dangerous in this case.

In focusing on the panopticon, Foucault adopts it as a symbol of his whole argument. The theory of discipline in which everyone is observed and analyzed is embodied in a building that makes these operations easy to perform. The panopticon develops out of the need for surveillance shown in the plague. Plague measures were needed to protect society: the panopticon allows power to operate efficiently. It is a functional, permanent structure. The transition from one to another represents the move to a society in which discipline is based on observation and examination. The disciplinary society is not necessarily one with a panopticon in every street: it is one where the state controls such methods of coercion and operates them throughout society. The development of a disciplinary society involves socio-economic factors, particularly population increase and economic development.

Foucault argues that more sophisticated societies offer greater opportunities for control and observation. This explains the reference to liberty and rights. Foucault assumes that modern society is based on the idea that all citizens are free and entitled to make certain demands on the state: this ideology developed in the eighteenth century, along with the techniques of control he describes. Foucault is not against such political ideals: he merely argues that they cannot be understood without the mechanisms that also control and examine the citizen. This examination spreads throughout society. Schools, factories, hospitals and prisons resemble each other, not just because they look similar, but because they examine pupils, workers, patients and prisoners, classify them as individuals and try to make them conform to the "norm". The fact that the modern citizen spends much of his life in at least some of these institutions reveals how far society has changed.