

City University of New York
Hunter College

The Theory of Michel Foucault Within the Context of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon and
Surveillance in the Modern Workplace

Jonathan Perlin

GSR 701: Thinking Critically in a Digital Society

Thomas DeGloma

In the midterm paper, the theory of Karl Marx within the context of the digital age was investigated. It was theorized that **“While in our modern age the human laborer still has function in the industrial environment, we are approaching a point where human labor within the industrial complex will be rendered obsolete.”** Included in the discussion were points on automation of the automotive and agricultural industries as well as the autonomous transportation of these goods. In this scenario involving the upheaval of the proletariat, the impetus of the paper stated that:

“As the current displacement exacerbates, it will likely lead to a revolution that will ultimately decenter society on a global scale. If the entire proletariat class finds itself unemployable, governmental entities would either need to plan to supplement the livelihoods of those laborers with a universal basic income or be prepared to retaliate to a full blown revolution.”

Reconsidering the dramatic nature of that statement, it is not necessarily *inevitable* that a violent revolution will take place. It is more accurate to conclude that the corporate production entity makes it exceedingly difficult to distinguish who the enemy is and therefore, whom to direct the fault and anger at. It is also more accurate to state that the power discrepancy between corporations and their workers makes conditions for revolution more ripe and increases the likelihood of such an event unfolding.

Fully eliminating the need for wage labor creates a situation where wage laborers no longer need to work themselves to exhaustion. This change, leading to a massive state of power and economic equality could destabilize the progress of the forces of production. While this could lead to the creation of new opportunities for the proletariat wage laborer, the questions remains of whether they are now free from the labor to pursue other

occupational endeavors, or if they are fated to remain sealed within the realm of manual labor and never break free of their proletariat prison.

In the mid-eighteenth century, English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham developed the concept of a *Panopticon*. This building or room is designed as a circular theater with a “guard post” in the middle with windows where the figure of authority can see out but the occupants of the rooms cannot see in. Therefore, the prisoners are unsure of if they are directly being surveilled, but at any moment they *could* be. In a series of letters describing the concept of the panopticon, Bentham writes:

“You will please to observe, that though perhaps it is the most important point, that the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as if under inspection, at least as standing a great chance of being so, yet it is not by any means the only one...Not only so, but the greater chance there is, of a given person's being at a given time actually under inspection, the more strong will be the persuasion - the more intense, if I may say so, the feeling, he has of his being so.” (Bozovic, 1995)

This concept has been widely reviewed and discussed within many different contexts, industries, and contexts. Within the context of surveillance (specifically surveillance in the workplace in the digital age), the concept of Bentham’s panopticon holds much greater significance.

Known for critiquing Bentham’s concept of the panopticon, twentieth-century French philosopher Michel Foucault, widely discusses the panoptic authority system within the context of a more post-industrial society. In an excerpt titled *Biopolitics and the Carceral Society*, Foucault states that:

“[The economy’s] panoptic functioning enables it to play this double role. By virtue of its methods of fixing, dividing, recording, it has been one of the simplest, crudest, also most concrete, but perhaps most indispensable conditions for the development of this immense activity of examination that has objectified human [behavior].”

(Lemert, 2018)

In our modern society, the digital age has managed to creep into the corners of everyday life. On a day-to-day basis, we could be under surveillance at any moment. Ergo, we arguably live in a panoptic culture. Attitudes towards constant surveillance vary from person to person and generation to generation. While those born after the advent of the internet are usually less wary of our continual monitoring, older generations tend to maintain the ideal of “privacy.” However, personal privacy and workplace privacy are two different topics. Foucault’s theory overlaps with both Marx’s and Bentham’s thoughts on surveillance in the workplace.

Tying in themes from the midterm paper, the discussion of automation within the industrial complex and the dissolution of wage labor introduces complications to the subject of surveillance within the workplace. In the modern workplace, specifically within the industry, much of our behavior is tracked and monitored by supervisors and other automated systems. Most of these systems are put in place to ensure not only that the work is being done efficiently, but also safely. While it is important that companies track productivity, automation of such means could require systems where workers are tracked and represented by numerical designations. While now, it is understood that these measures are put into place for safety and tracking productivity, it could also be comprehended as more processual with a focus on quantity and not of quality.

The main issue with panoptic practices in the workplace is an issue that revolves around the purpose of the systems being there in the first place. While we may be informed that this technology is for the purposes of safety and productivity, we cannot completely disregard the idea of manipulation and experimentation with the workforce and their productivity. In his work *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault points out that:

“The Panopticon functions as a kind of laboratory of power. Thanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men's [behavior]; knowledge follows the advances of power, discovering new objects of knowledge over all the surfaces on which power is exercised.” (Foucault, 1995)

With this plausible experimental feature of the panopticon system, it should be a cause of concern for our own workplace surveillance measures. While we are informed that these means of surveillance are harmless and non-invasive, these methods provide the perfect environment to be under the impression that we are being surveilled, but for what reason and to what ends, we cannot be positive.

The combination of rising resentment from the proletariat over automation of the workplace in combination with higher levels of surveillance in the workplace creates the perfect storm. This panoptic surveillance may further feelings of distrust and unrest amongst the proletariat wage laborers. The passive disciplinary methods offered by the panoptic method allow the supervisors of the proletariat to not have to do much at all if the wage laborer is under the impression that they are under constant surveillance. Foucault points out that with such methods of surveillance - where there is no physical form of authority present but under the constant impression that one is being surveilled - the

subject under surveillance begins to oversee themselves and in turn, becomes their own overseer. The ethics of such a method will need to be looked into further in order to establish whether or not it should be practiced in the workplace.

A means of surveillance such as the panopticon in our modern digital age would likely result in a counting and tracking system utilized by corporations to control their workforce. While the implications of such a system would likely boost production, it would also wreak havoc on our division of labor system. Foucault, a very prominent critique of Bentham's panopticon, likely foresaw a future of the workplace in not only industry, but also prisons, schools, and other institutions where discipline is necessary for success. However, while those subjected to the panopticon's power structure would be passive, disciplined, and cooperative, this manipulation of human behavior demonstrates ethical issues. A manipulation of workers on this level would likely lead to unrest.

As our industrial complex becomes more and more automated and reliant on automated machines, artificial intelligence, and machine learning algorithms, the question of what will happen to the proletariat remains to be seen. Within the context of panoptic surveillance, it is unlikely that human workers would be so subservient to their workplace panopticons. Attitudes towards surveillance in the workplace are already turbulent at best. In the future, perhaps panoptic surveillance of autonomous workers may be more efficient. However, in the present day where human laborers still work on factory floors, panoptic surveillance in the workplace will most likely lead to nothing but trouble.

Works Cited

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