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### Mistrust in the Age of Panoptic Power

The most stand-out piece of the previous unit was “Panopticism” from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. Despite its difficult prose, Foucault’s use of a hypothetical architectural implement in the panopticon helped to elucidate his ideas on surveillance and the power dynamics of control and trust that result from its use. The guards stationed in the central tower distrust the prisoners, and thus must keep them under constant surveillance (or the threat of constant surveillance) to keep them from falling to the “plague” of antisocial behavior. The prisoners, in turn, do not trust the guards because they *do not know who to trust*: the spectral surveillance is always there, a black box that gazes at the prisoners but does not accept a gaze back. Foucault’s piece argues that the replacement of corporal punishment with observation in the prison system takes away the obvious and concrete forms of discipline that the powers that be can inflict. In physical discipline, punishment happened at once and was a clearly telegraphed event. In a way, the punished could trust the punishers because their power was limited by physicality. The move to the intangible meant a dissolution of trust in power by the prisoners because the punishment of observation could be happening at any unknowable time, and thus punishment was always occurring, performed either actively or passively by the observers.

Foucault states that “behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of ‘contagions,’ of the plague, [...] people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder” (7). The treatment of the ills of society as a “plague” creates a sense of otherness

among those punished for such ills, marking them as mistrusted by the watchers. It is this sense of otherness, especially when compounded by the power dynamic of unfettered watching, that puts social relationships under such stress in the surveillance-as-power system. The panopticon is a draconian mechanical concept for surveillance, but the ideas about control that it represents can extend to digital technology. This has major implications when extrapolated to our modern society and the surveillance systems we have in place. One aspect of from my personal experience was an orientation I went through after being hired at a supermarket: the human resources representative giving the presentation bragged about the store's cameras and their ability to read "the serial number on a dollar bill from across the store." The claim was dubious, but it created an environment where control by surveillance was seen as a top priority for management, and act of working there meant a constant threat of unseen prying eyes watching my every move. The cameras felt like a betrayal of trust: if I was trusted enough to be hired by this establishment, why can I not be left to my own devices and work unscrutinized? Likewise, why should I or any of my coworkers trust that "the powers that be" are not *always* watching, and why should we trust that their watching is only for innocuous purposes like "loss prevention?"

The idea of observation itself is not inherently wicked, nor does it create an adverse power dynamic. Jane Jacobs, urban studies pioneer and fellow Scrantonian, writes in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* that the community-driven surveillance of wide city sidewalks affords pedestrians the role of "the lucky possessors of a city order that makes it relatively simple to keep the order because there are plenty of eyes on the street" (54). This idea of maintaining order is the same end as Foucauldian discipline's "plague prevention," minus the power dynamic of harsh architectural features like the panoptic prison. Jacobs also elaborates on "others:"

strangers that move through a neighborhood by its sidewalks. Rather than a central “tower” of power, the discipline is democratic, spread across the masses being watched. The community maintains a level of trust among itself, and because of this stability, strangers are regarded with apprehension but not absolute mistrust and thus harsh observational punishment. In other words, strangers are not regarded as “plague-carrying.” This contrast makes it clear that the Foucauldian panopticon’s structure is to blame for the dissolution of trust within communities and with its governors. The panopticon’s opaque watchtower, prisoner disconnect, and constant threat of surveillance (and thus punishment) create a two-way trust struggle between the punishers and the punished. These features are not unique to a draconian prison: the ideas of black box surveillance can just as easily apply to digital technology, such as CCTV cameras and government wiretapping such as the PRISM program. Foucault’s work acts as a warning, a sign of things to come if authorities exert too much force and place too little trust in its subjects. In trying to maintain too much order, disorder is created by lack of trust among the people.

Works Cited

Foucault, Michel, and Alan Sheridan. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage, 2012.

*Open WorldCat*, <http://0-lib.mylibrary.com.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk?id=435863>.

Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Vintage Books ed, Vintage Books, 1992.