

# Are We Living in a Post-Panoptic Society?

Written by Tobias Champion

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TOBIAS CHAMPION, APR 16 2019

The panoptic prison designed by Bentham (Bentham, Beauchamp and Bozovic, 1995) and later used by Foucault (1991), has maintained a position as the centre piece of surveillance theory. However, a growing trend in contemporary theory suggests the need to move towards post-panoptic thought. This essay is the latest addition to this school of thought. It will argue that we unquestionably live in a post-panoptic society. While Foucault's theory is the base for later works, its usefulness as a lens of analysis for contemporary surveillance is largely played out. The essay will analyse contemporary surveillance practices and their subsequent links to disciplining and controlling society. Its analysis will involve a comparison between panoptic theory and post-panoptic theory as to which best describes contemporary society. In doing so, it will draw on the early panoptic school of thought, its positives and oversights, as well as more contemporary thought regarding post-panopticism.

The essay will achieve this by outlining firstly, the parameters of discussion, within this, key terms will also be defined. Then, it will analyse Foucault's panoptic theory. It will outline its base assumptions and the theoretical thread which ties it to post-panopticism. While critiquing panopticism, the essay does not suggest a complete dismissal of Foucault. Instead, it will argue for the contemporary post-panoptic school to expand further on the base assumptions of Foucault's theory. Following this, post-panoptic theory will be outlined. This will address the advances in technology which have led to its creation, the role of risk as a policy direction and a shift in surveillance spaces. Then, the essay will analyse the most recent development in post-panoptic surveillance, the growth of privatised and commercialised surveillance. This, while separate to security surveillance in some instances, aims at the same end goal of controlling elements of society. Finally, the post-panoptic transition towards control society will be addressed. The essay will then conclude the analysis by questioning the future of post-panoptic surveillance. Attention will now turn to defining the parameters of the analysis.

To answer this question, we must first understand which society the question refers to. The essay will refer to 'we' as a liberal state such as the United States or United Kingdom, this is due three reasons. Firstly, the state itself is the best level of organisation to analyse surveillance. Not only is it clearly the structure in which global politics plays out, but also the structure within which security and sovereignty is applied. As Dillon (1996) suggests, 'no security outside the state; no state without security' (p14). Secondly, the prominence of liberal states in surveillance analysis and in Foucault's writing. Thirdly, the advancement of surveillance in liberal states brings with it the interesting juxtaposition of the liberal dilemma. This being states which supposedly support Locke's liberal ideals that 'the problem and practice of government is premised upon a relatively vigorous and autonomous civil society' (Gil, 1995, p5) increasingly tending towards Hobbesian state actions (Hobbes and Gaskin, 1995). Subsequently, liberal states question how to retain power over a supposedly free society. Thus, surveillance is their answer and liberal states provide the best lens to analyse the post-panoptic society.

The analysis within the essay will also focus on the discipline and control of these liberal societies. As such, reference will be made throughout to contemporary surveillance practices' effectiveness in control or discipline. The essay will now outline Foucault's panopticon theory, highlighting its end goal of discipline.

As previously mentioned, Bentham's panoptic prison design (1995) is the focus of Foucault's panoptic theory (1991). This suggests that a subject will self-discipline themselves when under the pressure of a watcher. Within the prison example this would take the form of a central guard tower which can view all prison cells around it. Prisoners would

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not however, be able to see into the central guard tower. Therefore, prisoners are unsure if they are specifically being watched at any one moment. This would then mean, according to Foucault, that they would constantly self-discipline themselves on the off chance that they are being watched at that one moment. The prison cells are therefore the sole site of surveillance. Ultimately, therefore, the panopticon is centred around exercising power over a citizen's body without necessarily using force. As Basturk (2017) suggests, the Panopticon is 'a process in which body is handled as an examined object', in which the goal is standardising behaviour (p3). This constitutes the shift between the exercise of classical sovereignty, whereby the body would be harmed, to a more modern interpretation by Foucault whereby power is exercised through keeping bodies alive by controlling them. Therefore, the discipline supposedly brought about through the panopticon. This would then tie into the liberal dilemma of states controlling supposedly free societies. On face value this element of the theory can be seen as valid and useful for analysing state power on citizens. Foucault's panopticon can, however, be critiqued when spaces of surveillance are examined.

While a prisoner may not leave their cell, the theories' wider implication is that specific spaces are subject to surveillance. Basturk (2017) summarises this as, the panopticon being 'a governance technique' dependant on, 'controlling the overlap of subject and discourse'(p4). Consequently, when subjects overlap discourses and go against the standardised action, surveillance is the means to control deviation. This however requires set spaces of surveillance, such as prisons. Outside of these spaces surveillance cannot be done, as the state does not control subjects to the same degree. Even within the prison example, Rhodes (2004) undermines the effectiveness of the panopticon to discipline prisoners stating, 'the most panoptic circumstances do not necessarily create the most docile bodies' (p6). Therefore, the need for designated spaces and experience in prisons undermines the panoptic theory in regards to the question as it seems unlikely there was ever a panoptic society in this understanding. As Foucault's theory requires these sites of surveillance, it must be said that this could not fit as a mode of governance for an entire state. Instead, the contemporary push for a post-panoptic society is far more realistic. It must be said that the base assumptions of Foucault's panopticon are key for understanding the contemporary post-panoptic society. The panoptic theory is limited in its ability to explain contemporary surveillance practices. Thus, what theory can we use to best understand contemporary surveillance practices? The essay will now answer this by analysing the contemporary post-panoptic society. It will discuss how, the combination of a growth in technology and adoption of risk as a policy measure, have led to the adoption of the post-panoptic society.

When considering post-panopticism, a key starting point is the work of Boyne (2000). Boyne argues the panopticon should be moved to one side. Boyne does not deny its usefulness as a comparative tool for the development of surveillance, however, that it does little to understand contemporary practices. This understanding is vital when analysing the growth of post-panoptic theory and its validity in assessing contemporary practices. As suggested by Haggerty (2006), the number of expanded post-panoptic theories only further delegitimises the contemporary legitimacy of Foucault's original theory. Galic, Tilman and Koops (2017) summarise the theoretical growth of surveillance studies, suggesting while Foucault represented phase one of surveillance study, phase two saw theories attempting to build on the gaps created in the panopticon by technological advances. Currently in phase three, surveillance studies are understood as an analysis of certain concepts or contexts rather than a more comprehensive theory of surveillance. An example of this would be Elmer's work (2003). This is important to understand when considering our post-panoptic society. The number of surveillance practices and participators is vast, for the purposes of this essay the factors which facilitated their growth will be analysed rather than each practice or participator themselves. While this section will draw on a number of participators, analysis will outline what facilitated their growth as a means of demonstrating their difference from the classical panoptic prison and theory. In doing so it will argue for the validity of contemporary post-panoptic theory. Attention will now turn to technological advances and how they have been the key driving force in the creation of a post-panoptic society.

Technological change is the most significant driving factor in the creation of the post-panoptic society. Contemporary surveillance methods go far beyond the specific spaces designated by Foucault. As a result, the ability to control and discipline society has become entrenched in surveillance practices. Lyon (2001) documented the early spread of personal technology within societies, their subsequent surveillance, and the lack of privacy this enabled. This process of technological advancement and surveillance has since only expanded. As personal technology has expanded, the previous spatial limitation faced by Foucault's panopticon is removed. The growth of technology, in the form of computers, phones and the internet, has also led to the expansion of dataveillance. First conceptualised by

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Clarke (1988), dataveillance allows the watcher to collect and view not only what an individual is currently doing, but their previous activities as well. Therefore, this is a departure from the discipline of the panopticon in that an individual is not aware they may be watched at any one moment but that their data is constantly collected and may be viewed at any time. Thus, technology has meant surveillance is not bound by areas or specific times. This can be further seen in the example of Smart Cities, in which all citizen's data is tracked to a degree never before seen (Lacinak & Ristvej, 2017; Elmaghraby & Losavio, 2014). The essay will now analyse the advancement of post-panoptic society through the adoption of risk and prevention as a policy measure.

While technological advances are the principle factor in enabling the growth of the post-panoptic society, risk strategies can be seen as the principle factor in shaping policy directions surrounding surveillance. This section of the essay will analyse the growth of risk policies and their subsequent effect in advancing the post-panoptic society. A field which has grown since the 1990's, risk can be understood as a form of governance based around anticipating threats (Aradau and Van Munster, 2011). Put more specially, 'Risk means the anticipation of catastrophe' (Beck, 2006, p 332), whereby a state is permanently in a state of anticipating threats and attacks. This, when combined with technological advancements, results in a 'high technological frontier which absolutely no one completely understands and which generates a diversity of possible futures' (Giddens, 1998, p3). As states are in a constant state of unknowing and fear, the desire for control subsequently grows and is strived for through surveillance.

To understand this development, the work of Agamben (2005) is essential. Through emergency circumstances, liberal states have been able to issue policies which would otherwise be unacceptable. In terms of surveillance this can be seen in the USA PATRIOT ACT (Lagasse & Columbia University, 2018). Following the 2001 World Trade Centre terror attacks, the act enabled the United States government to expand security measures which would normally violate citizens' rights. As outlined by Lyon (2003), this signified a major shift in surveillance practices whereby the previously mentioned dataveillance and personal technology are used to surveil entire societies in an attempt to control and monitor potential threats under risk. The post-panoptic society therefore differentiates in its scale and depth of surveillance when compared with the panopticon. Not only this, the control aspect brought about as a result of risk, is further substantiated by the 2013 Snowden revelations (Greenwald, 2013). Again, Lyon (2015) demonstrates the scale and interconnectedness of global surveillance suggests we are living in a global post-panoptic society rather than a state-centric post-panoptic society. Thus, the adoption of risk by liberal states has enabled technological advances to be utilised in a global post-panoptic society. Furthermore, we can understand the post-panoptic society as separate from the panopticon in that it is less focused on the discipline of the certain aspects of society in specified spaces, but a more general control of the wider society. The essay will now analyse the growth of privatised and commercialised surveillance. In doing so it will demonstrate the post-panoptic society encompasses a number of watchers outside of the state itself.

An aspect of the post-panoptic society which has expanded in recent years is private or commercialised surveillance. This can be understood as surveillance which is carried out by private companies rather than states. While there are examples which straddle security surveillance as well, increasingly, post-panoptic theory has examined the role of private companies. Contributing to the expansion of control society, private surveillance is part of the wider range of participators in the post-panoptic society. Mathiesen (1997) outlines the most prominent effect of private surveillance, the growth of the modern Synopticon. Originally referring to mass media, the Synopticon is viewed as the reverse of the panopticon in that the many watch the few. This results in a similar disciplining effect in that the few being watched act in accordance with the values of the wider watchers in an attempt to not stand out. Thus, this can be directly related to the growth of social media. In fact, the synoptic effects of social media are greater than mass media as a larger group are watching and being watched themselves. This is an example of the growing trend of participatory surveillance. Suggested by Poster (1990), individuals are now actors in their own surveillance. Using the example of social media this is again obvious as individuals open their own accounts and post of their own accord while also viewing other individual's profiles. Thus making themselves both the watched and watcher.

The final key element which separates the current post-panoptic society from a panoptic one can be found in the work of Deleuze (1992). This suggests that while Foucault (1991) and the panopticon are focused more on discipline, societies have transitioned to focus more on control. Instead of populations being enclosed within various institutions, technology has allowed control to still be exercised while individuals are more free to move around. Contemporary

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surveillance practices are therefore a central element of this control. While surveillance practices are less visible than the panoptic prison tower, their reach and control culminate in a far more effective means of surveillance. Furthermore, these practices have been internalised through participatory surveillance. In doing so, contemporary surveillance has become accepted.

To conclude, we unquestionably live in a post-panoptic society. While Foucault's panopticon (1991) provides the base for later work, it does little to explain contemporary surveillance practices. This has been demonstrated through an examination of the development of post-panopticism. Within this: technological advances, the adoption of risk policies, expanding private surveillance, and a shift towards control society has played key roles. As surveillance becomes accepted in liberal states and technology continues to develop, global surveillance networks will continue to monitor societies. Ultimately, it is difficult to see an end to contemporary surveillance.

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