



«Τὰ δὲ ἐν αὐτῇ ἀγλαίσματα ὡς ἂν ἐν ζωῇ κείμενα κῆπος Διὸς λέγεται, καὶ εἶδεν ἐκεῖ ὁ Πόρος οἷς ἐπληρώθη βεβαρημένος».

(Lo splendore di vita che è nell'anima vien detto il giardino di Zeus, e lì dorme Poros gravato del nettare di cui s'è riempito; Plotino, *Enneadi*, a cura di G. Faggin, III, 5, 35-37)

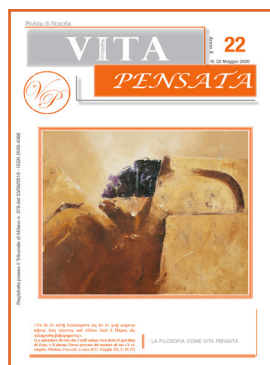
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PANOPTICISM. FOUCAULT AND A GAZE AT DIGITAL SOCIETY

di
SERENA SPARTÀ

In the flow of time, a thought lives through the uses that are subsequently made from it. In this paper the main argument concerns the third part of *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) by Michel Foucault. His considerations are so foresighted that even if we read about the panopticon's application in the eighteenth century we find continuity with our contemporary times. This paper provides an insight into what many social scholars refer to as the *digital panopticism* of the new era. Is it possible to research why and what happened with the digital revolution? From a sociological perspective, without losing the philosophical ground of such a revolution/innovation, multiple causes and effects will be taken into consideration and linked: the economic, political and of course social factors that contribute to keep this machinery working. As Shoshana Zuboff said in her article *Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization* (2015): «surveillance capitalism challenges the democratic norm and [...] market capitalism»¹. Many questions arise about how, when, and why it is so widely accepted among the new generation. Is it a voluntary submission by the individual to the World Wide Web, to the social network, to this virtual empire², or is it affected from the collectivity?

At the end of the eighteenth century, the philosopher Jeremy Bentham projected a perfect example of the surveillance dispositif: the Panopticon. From the ancient Greek word, it stands for 'all' (*pan*) 'visible' (*opticus*). Indeed, thanks to its circular architecture, the ideal prison was designated to have a perfect visibility of all captives from one unique perspective: a high tower with dark glass situated at the cen-

ter of the building. In this way, just the thought that there may be an (unverifiable³) guardian – who always alerts and controls – should be enough to self-censure the inmate. Owing to these spaces and these regulations, a new type of individual is produced, a 'disciplined' and obedient one. This mechanism was considered as a real device for adjusting individuals and their behavior; the isolation and confinement were also used as effective rehab resources. Currently, these two procedures are still regular in prisons even though many cases of recidivisms have proved their failure.

In the third part of his book, Michel Foucault points out all the uses of this ideal construction in the modern age. At the beginning it was intended for prisoners only, but its way of subdividing space, and organizing and monitoring multiple individuals was also transferred to workers, schoolchildren, madmen, and patients, so that a panoptic factory, a panoptic school, a panoptic hospital, for example, began to be built. Is it possible to make even a panoptic country? To answer this question, it is necessary to think of the panopticon as more than just a building. Yes, the structure itself is coercive but it is also the embodiment of a set of principles such as the dyad of being seen/see: «in the peripheral ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower one sees everything without ever being seen»⁴. This disciplining mechanism is a functional political technology that

is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. [...] (That) assures the hold of the power that is exer-

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cised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection⁵.

Bentham also laid down the principle that power should be visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. The English philosopher planned a kind of mechanism, however not an infallible one, whereby even supervisors were potentially monitored; but in the society of digital surveillance, the 'visible' power is the main characteristic that completely disappears. In fact, the ones who monitor are protected by secrecy, in the image and likeness of the 'hidden God, the All-seeing invisible One'⁶. Using Foucault's words, those are «the eyes that must see without being seen»⁷. The tall tower that once was the symbol of the 'always alerted power' is now a hidden shadow that requires of its users to be completely transparent. The panopticon of our contemporary times is a virtual one, based on the data-veillance. In other words, the new surveillance practices of digital information, going

beyond Foucault's forecasts, are mostly based on elaboration of information for economic, political, and social purposes. The electronic 'superpanopticon' functions through the automatization of spying on data that is naively or intentionally ceded by its users to the network. This method of control is performed through the algorithmic collection, selection, and cross-checking of an uncontrolled amount of personal data that make the individual completely *transparent*. What for Rousseau was the dream of a transparent society (that should be at the same time visible and readable in each of its parts) becomes now spooky and real. This transparency allows for everyone to be constantly monitored, observed, tested, evaluated, judged – and all this without any possibility of reciprocity between the users and those who control the data. What all those panoptic mechanisms have in common is the knowledge that is produced about the ones that are under control, either inside the cage (where prisoners were forced to get in) or on the platform (where users willingly navigate). However, Foucault warns: «visibility is a trap»⁸. The more the power knows, the more it sees into the prisoner's

cell by its surveillance or into platforms that each individual uses, the more pervasive it becomes. Due to their visibility, those activities and information are constantly monitored, studied, analyzed. The control over the body has become the hold over the pixel. Pixels are our words, thoughts, images, expressions that we deliberately post online. In this way, human activities are all *reified*⁹, as *goods* in Marxist terminology, as ‘everything you can buy and everything you can sell’.

Regarding the active or passive status of the individual, the inhabitants of the digital panoptic are not like the prisoners in cells. Their activities par excellence are to produce, to transmit, and to receive information. Everyone is a sender and a recipient in a scheme ‘from many to many’, living in a *prosumer*¹⁰ attitude. This neologism is a centaur word that stands both for producer and consumer meanings. The aim is to highlight our way to stay in the internet: we have become co-authors; indeed with this *medium* we are not only passive listeners or observers (like we were with the radio or television) but we actively give and produce information as well.

This mass-media system keeps itself in motion. This is only possible until the economic pressure above keeps its motion that holds the whole of society together. And this, in turn, is sustained by all the individuals that are subjected to it. In the French philosopher’s words:

We are in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of Power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism¹¹.

Regarding the economic aspect, the position of the creator of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, is that «only a system based on publicity can make possible the connection of people all over the world, to make up for those people who could not afford it»¹². Therefore this economic factor is decisive for thinking about the digital revolution in a different way. Renato Curcio, a controversial Italian figure¹³, prefers to use the term “innovation” instead of “revolution.” In his book *Impero Virtuale* (2015) improvements in informatics are correlated with the capitalist economy and the

consumer society. The digital panopticon itself is articulated in terms of profit. Agencies such as Google and Facebook sell our data to market companies; these can track our movements and interests, collect, analyze, and cross them utilizing two techniques called data mining and computer matching. With these algorithmic systems, societies are perfectly able to create an identity profile. The aim is to predict first and then to induct our shopping activity. Moreover, prediction and induction were also used in politics. In 2018, a famous scandal broke all the news. A survey by the Federal Trade Commission revealed that one analysis company called Cambridge Analytics had bought the information of more than 50 million Facebook users and then used it, without their consent, for political purposes: promoting and practically directing none other than the presidential campaign of Donald Trump. This is one example of how this digital power has significant and multiple effects on the real lives of citizens. It is information, communication, spectacle. It circulates and arrives where values and norms are formed, symbols and beliefs that constitute collective communities. It is widespread, ubiquitous, and reticular. It continuously colonizes new territories, new virtual spaces, and, moreover, the ‘collective imagination’ of each individual. Through media influence, one could confuse what one sees as the truth. Instead, one lives in a platonic cave made of shadows, with fictitious and false values that are, however, commonly shared. Conformism makes it even more real. The lighter power is, the more dangerous, pervasive, and infamous it becomes: «it tends to the non-corporal; and, the more it approaches this limit, the more constant, profound and permanent are its effects»¹⁴.

However, if power is eminently interpreted in negative and repressive terms, how does it induce obedience? This is Foucault’s main question reformulated in this way: If social networks, or the internet in general, are now described in these negative terms, why do they receive such a warm welcome from the new and old generation? Why do we all put on the web all our information, deep thoughts, expressions, images, and so on? The Italian sociologist affirms that



another process develops and (it) is correlate with: the active and even enthusiastic adaptation of billions of people, unbounded from each other, to the new intrusive digital environment¹⁵,

an unique digital ecosystem from which it will be difficult to get out, but, above all, impossible not to be somehow part of it.

The global village (virtual and real) is not just an intermediary in which the communicative interactions take place. It is the interior of the social relations' network that can affect, create, and modify an identity of an individual and all the coordinates of everyday life. According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, this is possible because, as Aristotle observed, the human being is by nature ζῷον πολιτικόν. It means that the human being is structured and it has a meaning and receives meaning from collective life too, from the *poleis*, the community, from the society where she lives. The identity of the human being is always mobile, it is *uno, nessuno e centomila*,

one, one hundred thousand, no one¹⁶. In this context one could understand the way in which the digital revolution brings about problems concerning the rights, rules, and regulations of the virtual community; terms such as 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' are full of new connotations so that the problem of citizenship — who gets to enter this global city, and who cannot be part of it — is put into question daily.

Moreover, an ontological and existential revolution is underway. When the body began to turn into a pixel, it became alienated from the digital self. The Heideggerian *Dasein* experiences a decisive virtual reform. The specific characteristic of being here and now has become 'everywhere and every hour,' in a desirable hyper connection that defines a new condition of existence too: Berkley's principle *Esse est percipi* (that was legitimately confuted) returns now with a terrible and new interpretation: Only the one who transmits (and therefore who is also perceived) exists. In his book *The excited society* (2012), the German philosopher Christoph Türcke writes that life and death are redefined in these terms:

those who are not on the air, those who do not transmit, do not exist. [...] Physically, this can be very healthy but from the media's point of view, one is dead¹⁷.

Sensation-seeking is a mass phenomenon that demonstrated this turn: sensation becomes a vital necessity. One must make sensation and have sensation. The struggle to be noticed is also a narcissistic competition between individuals, relying on everyone's desire to be someone, just to be part of the virtual community. Ultimately, being on platforms has become the glue of collective life: one exists if one is part of the collective memory.

In conclusion, considering all that has been said in this paper, it is now possible to answer the question of whether even a panoptic country could be made. Someone could answer that, yes, we are a (and not *in a*) global panoptic society. Moreover, as the Canadian sociologist David Lyon points out, the information society is by its very nature a supervised one in which sight coincides entirely with surveillance. We leave traces behind us that can be monitored not just by third parties but by anyone. Everyone is monitoring everyone else: each individual is Big Brother and prisoner at the same time. If transparency dominates, then surveillance is necessarily a form of control which makes the democratic dimension begin to tremble. And this is opposed to the concept of freedom. The relevance of Foucault consists in its emancipatory force. The philosopher who theorized power everywhere in its immanence and ramifications also pursued the goal of adopting a critical method to look at reality with the hope of being ruled as little as possible and, in any case, always less so, because it (power) always comes with resistance. *Freedom is never enough*¹⁸.

Note

¹S. Zuboff, *Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization*, Journal of Information Technology, Usa, 2015, p. 75.

²The reference is the main thesis by R. Curcio in his book *L'Impero virtuale. Colonizzazione dell'immaginario e controllo sociale*, Sensibili alle foglie, Roma 2015.

³ «Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so». M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison*, Penguin Books, London 1991, p. 201.

⁴ Ivi, p. 202.

⁵ Ivi, p. 187.

⁶ N. Bobbio, *Il potere invisibile. Democrazia e segreto*, Torino, Einaudi, 2011, p. 5.

⁷ M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison*, cit., p. 171.

⁸ Ivi, p. 200.

⁹ This concept is taken up by the philosopher György Lukács, which designates the phenomenon in his book: *La reificazione e la coscienza del proletariato*, in *Storia e coscienza di classe*, SugarCo, Milano 1974, p. 107.

¹⁰ This word came from the mind of an esthetic italian, critical and historian of art called Giuseppe Frazzetto. In his book (*Epicò Caotico. Videogiochi e altre mitologie tecnologiche*, Fausto Lupetti Editore, Bologna 2015) videogames and social network are widely discussed with a multidisciplinary and innovative approach.

¹¹ M. Foucault, *Discipline and punish. The birth of the prison*, cit., p. 217.

¹² Gratuity of social networks is a privilege that is paid in the form of hidden domination.

¹³ Renato Curcio degree in Trento in sociology studies and he is currently back to his sociological works and analyzes. But he was one of the founder of the far-left terrorist movement "Brigate Rosse" during what historians called the Italian terrible "Years of Lead" from '60 till '80.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 203.

¹⁵ R. Curcio, *L'Impero virtuale. Colonizzazione dell'immaginario e controllo sociale*, cit., p. 9. Quoting the entire Italian reference: "un altro processo si sviluppa e lo affianca: l'adattamento attivo e perfino entusiastico di miliardi di persone slegate tra loro al nuovo intrusivo contesto digitale".

¹⁶ This is a reference by the Italian Nobel laureate Luigi Pirandello from *Uno, Nessuno e Centomila* (1926), *One, one hundred thousand, no one*.

¹⁷ C. Türcke, *La società eccitata. Filosofia della sensazione*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2012, p. 53.

¹⁸ *La libertà non è mai troppa*. This intense phrase was formulated by the Italian professor A.G. Biuso, which here I take the opportunity to thank, during one of his lectures of the cultural sociology course entitled *Social Network e Dominio*, from which many ideas and notes here are written and inspired from it.



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