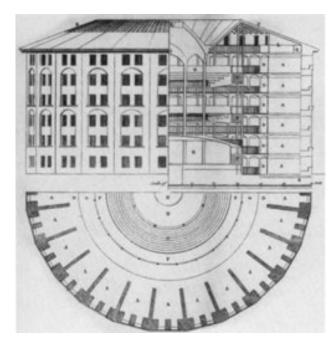# Michel Foucault: *The Eye of Power: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot*

BAROU: Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* is a work published at the end of the 18th century and since then fallen into oblivion. Yet in *Discipline and Punish* you cite such astonishing phrases having been applied to it as "an event in the history of the human mind," "a sort of Columbus's egg in the order of politics." And you have presented its author as "the Fourier of a police society." For us this is baffling. But tell us first how you came upon the *Panopticon.*

FOUCAULT: It was while I was studying the origins of clinical medicine. I had been planning a study of hospital architecture in the second half of the 18th century, when the great movement for the reform of medical institutions was getting under way. I wanted to find out how the medical gaze was institutionalized, how it was effectively inscribed in social space, how the new form of the hospital was at once the effect and the support of a new type of gaze. In examining the series of different architectural projects which followed the second fire at the Hotel-Dieu in 1772, I noticed how the whole problem of the visibility of bodies, individuals, and things, under a system of centralized observation, was one of their most constant directing principles. In the case of the hospitals this general problem involves a further difficulty: it was necessary to avoid undue contact, contagion, physical proximity, and overcrowding, while at the same time ensuring ventilation and circulation of air, at once dividing space up and keeping it open, ensuring a surveillance which would be both global and individualizing while at the same time carefully separating the individuals under observation. For some time I thought all these problems were specific to 18th-century medicine and its beliefs.

Then while studying the problems of the penal system, I noticed that all the great projects for re-organizing the prisons … take up this same theme, but accompanied this time by the almost invariable reference to Bentham. There was scarcely a text or a proposal about the prisons which didn't mention Bentham's "device"—the "Panopticon."

The principle was this. A perimeter building in the form of a ring. At the center of this, a tower, pierced by large windows opening onto the inner face of the ring. The outer building is divided into cells each of which traverses the whole thickness of the building. These cells have two windows, one opening onto the inside, facing the windows of the central tower, the other,

outer one allowing daylight to pass through the whole cell. All that is then needed is to put an overseer in the tower and place in each of the cells a lunatic, a patient, a convict, a worker, or a schoolboy. The back lighting enables one to pick out from the central tower the little captive silhouettes in the ring of cells. In short, the principle of the dungeon is reversed; daylight and the overseer's gaze capture the inmate more effectively than darkness, which afforded after all a sort of protection.

… The very word "Panopticon" seems crucial here, as designating the principle of a system. Thus Bentham didn't merely imagine an architectural design calculated to solve a specific problem, such as that of a prison, a school, or a hospital. He proclaimed it as a veritable discovery, saying of it himself that it was "Christopher Columbus's egg." And indeed what Bentham proposed to the doctors, penologists, industrialists, and educators was just what they had been looking for. He invented a technology of power designed to solve the problems of surveillance. One important point should be noted: Bentham thought and said that his optical system was the great innovation needed for the easy and effective exercise of power. It has in fact been widely employed since the end of the 18th century. But the procedures of power that are at work in modern societies are much more numerous, diverse, and rich. It would be wrong to say that the principle of visibility governs all technologies of power used since the 19th century.

[...]

PERROT: What is striking moreover in Bentham's thinking is the question of the number of people. He repeatedly makes the claim to have solved the problems of discipline posed by a great number of persons in the hands of a very few.

FOUCAULT: Like his contemporaries, he faced the problem of the accumulation of men. But whereas the economists posed the problem in terms of wealth (population being in itself both wealth as labor force, source of economic activity and consumption, and cause of poverty, when excessive or idle), Bentham poses the question in terms of power—population as object of relations of domination. I think one can say that the mechanisms of power at work even in such a highly developed administration as the French monarchy, were full of loopholes. It was a discontinuous, rambling, global system with little hold on detail, either exercised over consolidated social groups or else imposing itself only by means of exemplary interventions (as can be readily seen in its fiscal system and its criminal justice). Power had only a weak capacity for "resolution," as one might say in photographic terms; it was incapable of an individualizing, exhaustive analysis of the social body. But the economic changes of the 18th century made it necessary to ensure the circulation of effects of power through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions. By such means, power—even when faced with ruling a multiplicity of men—could be as efficacious as if it were being exercised over a single one.

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BAROU: Isn't it astonishing then to find the French Revolution, through people like Lafayette, welcoming the project of the Panopticon? We know that he helped to have Bentham made a "French citizen" in 1791.

FOUCAULT: I would say Bentham was the complement to Rousseau. What in fact was the Rousseauist dream that motivated many of the revolutionaries? It was the dream of a transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts, the dream of there no longer existing any zones of darkness, zones established by the privileges of royal power or the prerogatives of some corporation, zones of disorder. It was the dream that each individual, whatever position he occupied, might be able to see the whole of society, that men's hearts should communicate, their vision be unobstructed by obstacles, and that opinion of all reign over each.... Bentham is both that and the opposite. He poses the problem of visibility, but thinks of a visibility organized entirely around a dominating, overseeing gaze. He effects the project of a universal visibility which exists to serve a rigorous, meticulous power. Thus Bentham's obsession, the technical idea of the exercise of an "all-seeing" power, is grafted onto the great Rousseauist theme which is in some sense the lyrical note of the Revolution. The two things combine into a working whole, Rousseau's lyricism and Bentham's obsession.

PERROT: There is a phrase in the *Panopticon:* "Each comrade becomes an overseer."

FOUCAULT: Rousseau no doubt would have said the reverse: each overseer should become a comrade. Take *Emile:* Emile's tutor is an overseer, he must also be a comrade.

BAROU: Not only does the French Revolution not read Bentham as we do today, it even finds a humanitarian intention in his project.

FOUCAULT: Exactly. When the Revolution poses the question of a new justice, what does it envisage as its principle? Opinion. The new aspect of the problem of justice, for the Revolution, was not so much to punish wrongdoers as to prevent even the possibility of wrongdoing, by immersing people in a field of total visibility where the opinion, observation, and discourse of others would restrain them from harmful acts. This idea is constantly present in the texts of the Revolution.

PERROT: The immediate context also had a part to play in the adoption of the Panopticon by the Revolution. The problem of prisons was on the order of the day…. Hospitals and prisons were two great themes of enlightened circles of discussion in Parisian salons. It became a matter of scandal that prisons should be as they were, a school of vice and crime, places so devoid of hygiene that people died in them….

FOUCAULT: A fear haunted the latter half of the eighteenth century: the fear of darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths. It sought to break up the patches of darkness that blocked the light, eliminate the shadowy areas of society, demolish the unlit chambers where arbitrary political acts, monarchical caprice, religious superstitions, tyrannical and priestly plots, epidemics and the illusions of ignorance were fomented. The chateaux, lazarets, bastilles, and convents inspired even in the pre-Revolutionary period a suspicion and hatred exacerbated by a certain political overdetermination. The new political and moral order could not be established until these places were eradicated. During the Revolutionary period the Gothic novels develop a whole fantasy-world of stone walls, darkness, hideouts, and dungeons which harbor, in significant complicity, brigands and aristocrats, monks and traitors. The landscapes of Ann Radcliffe's novels are composed of mountains and forests,

caves, ruined castles, and terrifyingly dark and silent convents. Now these imaginary spaces are like the negative of the transparency and visibility which it is aimed to establish. This reign of "opinion," so often invoked at this time, represents a mode of operation through which power will be exercised by virtue of the mere fact of things being known and people seen in a sort of immediate, collective, and anonymous gaze. A form of power whose main instance is that of opinion will refuse to tolerate areas of darkness. If Bentham's project aroused interest, this was because it provided a formula applicable to many domains, the formula of "power through transparency," subjection by "illumination." In the Panopticon, there is used a form close to that of the castle—a keep surrounded by walls—to paradoxically create a space of exact legibility.

BAROU: It's also the areas of darkness in man that the century of Enlightenment wants to make disappear.

FOUCAULT: Absolutely.

PERROT: At the same time one is very struck by the techniques of power used within the Panopticon. Essentially it's the gaze; but also speech, because he has those famous "tin tubes," that extraordinary invention, connecting the chief inspector with each of the cells, in which Bentham tells us that not just a single prisoner, but small groups of prisoners are confined. Finally, it's the importance of dissuasion that's very marked in Bentham's text. "It is necessary," he writes, "for the inmate to be ceaselessly under the eyes of an inspector; this is to lose the power and even almost the idea of wrongdoing." Here we are at the heart of the preoccupations of the Revolution: preventing people from wrongdoing, taking away their wish to commit wrong. In a word, to make people unable and unwilling.

FOUCAULT: We are talking about two things here: the gaze, and interiorization. And isn't it basically the problem of the cost of power? In reality power is only exercised at a cost. Obviously, there is an economic cost, and Bentham talks about this. How many overseers will the Panopticon need? How much will the machine then cost to run? But there is also a specifically political cost. If you are too violent, you risk provoking revolts. Again, if you intervene in too discontinuous a manner, you risk allowing politically costly phenomena of resistance and disobedience to develop in the interstices. This was how monarchical power operated. For instance, the judiciary only arrested a derisory proportion of criminals; this was made into the argument that punishment must be spectacular so as to frighten the others. Hence there was a violent form of power which tried to attain a continuous mode of operation through the virtue of examples. The new theorists of the 18th century objected to this: such a form of power was too costly in proportion to its results. A great expenditure of violence is made which ultimately only had the force of an example. It even becomes necessary to multiply violence, but precisely by doing so one multiplies revolts….

In contrast to that you have the system of surveillance, which on the contrary involves very little expense. There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be a

minimal cost. When Bentham realizes what he has discovered, he calls it the Colombus's egg of political thought, a formula exactly the opposite of monarchical power. It is indeed the case that the gaze has had great importance among the techniques of power developed in the modern era, but, as I have said, it is far from being the only or even the principal system employed.

[…]

BAROU: …[I]t is hard to discern who it is who stands to profit from the organized space that Bentham conceived. This seems uncertain even regarding those who occupy or visit the central tower. One has the feeling of confronting an infernal model that no one, either the watcher or the watched, can escape.

FOUCAULT: This indeed is the diabolical aspect of the idea and all the applications of it. One doesn't have here a power which is wholly in the hands of one person who can exercise it alone and totally over the others. It's a machine in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised. This seems to me to be characteristic of the societies installed in the 19th century. Power is no longer substantially identified with an individual who possesses or exercises it by right of birth; it becomes a machinery that no one owns. Certainly everyone doesn't occupy the same position; certain positions preponderate and permit an effect of supremacy to be produced.

[…]

PERROT: …[O]ne has the vertiginous sense of being in the presence of an invention that even its inventor is incapable of controlling. Yet it's Bentham who begins by relying on a single power, that of the central tower. As one reads him one wonders who he is putting in the tower. Is it the eye of God? But God is hardly present in the text; religion only plays a role of utility. Then who is it? In the last analysis one is forced to conclude that Bentham himself has no clear idea to whom power is to be entrusted.

FOUCAULT: He can't entrust it to any one person since no one can or may occupy the role that the King had in the old system, that is as the source of power and justice. It was implicit in the theory of monarchy that trust in the King was a necessity. His very existence, founded in God's will; he was the source of justice, law, and power. Power, in his person, could only be good; a bad King was either an accident of history or a punishment by God, the absolutely good sovereign. On the other hand, if power is arranged as a machine working by a complex system of cogs and gears, where it's the *place* of a person which is determining, not his *nature*, no reliance can be placed on a single individual. If the machine were such that someone could stand outside it and assume sole responsibility for managing it, power would be identified with that one man and we would be back with a monarchical type of power. In the Panopticon each person, depending on his place, is watched by all or certain of the others. You have an apparatus of total and circulating mistrust, because there is no absolute point. The perfected form of surveillance consists in a summation of *malveillance.*

BAROU: As you say, it's a diabolical piece of machinery, sparing no one. The image, perhaps, of power today….

NOTES

Columbus's Egg: A no doubt apocryphal story in which Christopher Columbus challenged a group of noblemen to make an egg stand upright on a table. When none of the assembled could pull off this trick, Columbus purportedly took the egg, tapped the large end firmly but gently against the table, thus cracking the shell in a splinter pattern. He then set the egg down and it stood on its own. The idea being, the answer was simple once someone thought of it.

Jeremy Bentham: (1748-1832) was an English philosopher and social reformer. He is best known as an early advocate of utilitarianism, which essentially argues that the right act or policy is that which creates "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." A political radical, he was a leading theorist in the philosophy of law; among his many proposals for legal and social reform was a design for a prison building he called the Panopticon (above).

Charles Fourier: (1772-1837) was a French philosopher who advocated a socialist system of cooperation. In his model society, communities he called "phalanxes" would be scientifically planned to offer a maximum of both cooperation and self-fulfillment to their members. These communities were to be built around structures he called "grand hotels," each of which was a four-level apartment complex where the rich had the uppermost apartments and the poor the ground floor. Wealth was determined by one's job; jobs were assigned based on "natural talents, passions, and inclinations" of the individual. There were incentives, jobs people might not enjoy doing would receive higher pay. Fourier coined the word *féminisme* in 1837; as early as 1808, he had argued that the extension of women's rights was the general principle of all social progress.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was a Swiss-born philosopher of the Enlightenment, whose ideas variously influenced the French Revolution, socialist thinking, and the Romantic movement. His most important work, *The Social Contract*, describes the relationship between man and society. In this book, Rousseau argues that a state based on a genuine social contract would give its citizens real freedom in exchange for their obedience to the law. This civil society is united by what he called "the General Will," that is, the will of the people as reflected through the body politic. The General Will is not specifically the mere representation of a majority opinion. If people should unwisely oppose themselves to the General Will, it might become necessary to force them to be free. Or as he said, "Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body; which means nothing else than that he shall be forced to be free...."

Emile or On Education (1762) details Rousseau's philosophy of education and focuses on the principle of "natural education." Central to this principle is the idea that it is possible to preserve the child's "original perfect nature" "by means of the careful control of his education and environment, based on an analysis of the different physical and psychological stages through which he passed from birth to maturity." Rousseau here argues that the momentum for learning was governed by "nature" (i.e, the development of the individual)—and that the educator's job is to facilitate that process.

Lazaret, *usually lazaretto***:** an institution (as a hospital) for those with contagious diseases.