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Space and Social Theory

Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity

Edited by Georges Benko and Ulf Strohmayer

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Imperfect Panopticism: Envisioning the Construction of Normal Lives.

Matt Hannah

The term "panopticism" is now common currency among critical social theorists, and much valuable work has been inspired and informed by Foucault's resurrection and analysis of Bentham's prison design in *Discipline and Punish* (1979).¹ There are two related senses in which much of this work has been unnecessarily limited, however. First, it has tended to remain preoccupied almost exclusively with the exercise of power in institutional settings; and second, to the extent that it does venture beyond institutional walls, it employs the image of the panopticon more as a motif or mood setter and a vague guide to selecting important questions than as a source of particular analytical tools. Responsibility for both of these limitations can be laid for the most part at Foucault's doorstep. Although his later work on "governmentality" certainly brought the issue of disciplinary power out into the amorphous space of trans-institutional society as a whole, he never precisely spelled out the ways in which the panoptic logic of visibility had to change to operate effectively in an environment where its subjects did not suffer continuous confinement.

In this essay I will attempt to show in detail how the basic logic of the panopticon operates to maintain normality among the already normal. My hope in so doing is not only to provide more flexible tools of social-geographic interpretation, but also to highlight the common patterns linking control of the "marginalized" with control of the "mainstream." While I do not mean to suggest that free citizens suffer as much under imperfect panopticism as do prisoners and asylum inmates under institutional panopticism, I do wish to discourage the opposite conclusion, namely that the lives of the institutionalized are fundamentally incomparable to the lives of the free. If we see the two as different points on a continuum, we are more likely to develop a healthy discomfort with some of the possibilities of social control looming in the near

¹ See especially Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: the Workhouse System, 1834-1884* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

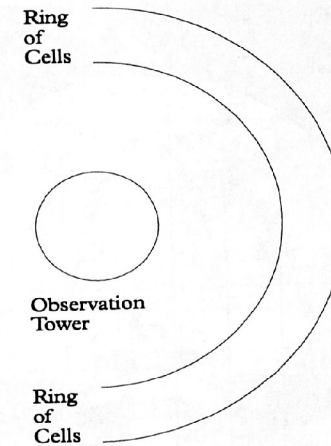


Figure 15.1 Plan of the Panopticon

future, and also to discern a commonality of interest with the more obviously oppressed.

I will begin with a brief summary of the panoptic logic and its implications for the exercise of control within institutions. This will follow Foucault's analysis in broad outline, and thus may be familiar to some readers; however, I introduce some differences in interpretation which will turn out to be crucial in the second part of the essay. Part 2 will present a refitting of the panoptic logic to demonstrate how it works in a trans-institutional setting, as well as a brief discussion of the conditions of possibility allowing it to do so. The final part will consist of a speculative survey of the possibilities for research opened up by this new perspective on social order, directions in which it still needs to be elaborated or altered, etc.

Part 1

The Panopticon as envisioned by Bentham is a multistoried annual building with a tower at the center of the circular inner space (Figs 15.1 and 15.2). The cells in the outer ring each faces the tower with a completely open barred front. The outer end of each cell is open to light from the outside. Thus, from the central tower, each prisoner (confined one to a cell) is backlit in every daytime activity.

The tower itself, however, is dark, with venetian blinds over the windows. The prisoners never know whether or not they are being watched, but the threat is ever present, and, combined with the capability for immediate punishment,

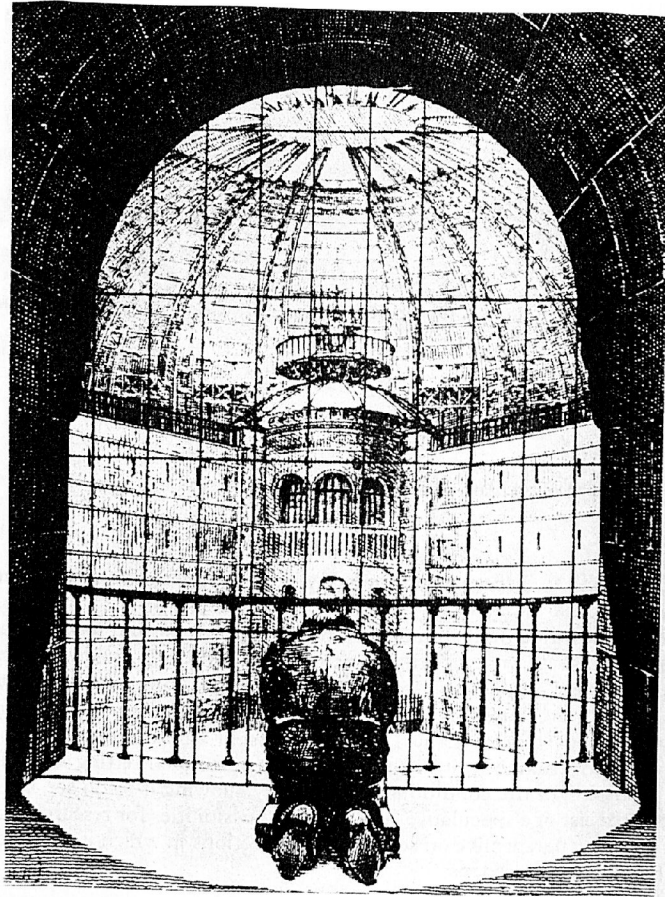


Figure 15.2 View from a cell
Source: Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

constantly discourages irregular behavior (for example, cursing, masturbating, and especially communicating with other prisoners). Thus described, the carceral situation embodies the rudiments of a relation between human object and authoritative subject which throws everyday life in the modern West into a revealing light.²

2 For a fuller appreciation of how the Panopticon project (and its historical failure) related to the context of interests and struggles in contemporary England, *Discipline and Punish*,

Prisoners as human objects are visible as individuals: each one is distinguishable from all others; each irregular activity is assignable to a specific person. All prisoners are potentially visible in all activities; they are completely limned by light. None can escape punishment as an automatic consequence of abnormal behavior. The watchers in the tower have direct control of the means of punishment through a hierarchical structure of command unifying what I will call the three "moments" of control: *observation*, *judgement* and *enforcement* of behavior.³ Again, while watching is only sporadic, the threat of being watched never ceases. Negligence and leniency on the part of the watchers are discouraged by their vigilant superiors who, in turn, are watched, and so on up to the prison director. The whole hierarchy is completely invisible and anonymous to the prisoners; they themselves are the only identifiable people involved in the correctional process.

The immediate goal of the panoptic subject/object relation is normalization of prisoner behavior. The social ends served by normalization may vary somewhat in their specifics but all basically call for the production of people capable of functioning economically and socially without threatening other free citizens. The ideal rehabilitated prisoner is one who reenters society with the conviction that proportional punishment or censure *inevitably* follows every significant behavioral irregularity. Transgressions seem to create and enact their own punishments through neutral and anonymous institutional mechanisms.

To transform aberrant behavior, the panoptic "normalizing machine" must first confine each human being in a strictly separate space. This initial condition allows the three moments of panoptic functioning (observation, judgement, and enforcement) to proceed *infallibly*: there is no confusion as to who perpetrates abnormality, and punishment is meted out *only* to the perpetrator.⁴ Any mistaken punishment would suddenly throw the prison hierarchy into

should be supplemented with a reading of Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: the Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850*, (New York, NY, Penguin, 1978). Ignatieff places the Panopticon within what might be called a "current affairs of the past," while Foucault reads its "internal" logic in order to produce a "history of the present."

- 3 This tripartite division is adapted from Foucault's list of three "instruments" of disciplinary power: "hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 170). Since Foucault is analyzing a prison, he can assume a tight link between judgment and enforcement, both of which are subsumed under the category "normalizing judgment," as well as the unification of the whole process in the examination. In a broader social context, judgment and enforcement are not automatically coordinated, while the examination plays a less central role.
- 4 Since at the time, Bentham envisioned the Panopticon more as a manufactory than as an instrument of moral reform, with prisoners working up to 16 hours a day in separate cells, he preferred to allow the market and its requirement for a healthy labor force to determine the nature and severity of punishment for abnormal behavior. Around this time, the turn of the nineteenth century, no new consensus had been formed as to how abnormal behavior within prisons should be punished. Although by the late nineteenth century, the transition from such measures as whipping, putting in irons and diet-reduction, to more subtle and unobtrusive punishments (e.g., denial of exercise or visiting privileges), was more or less complete; in Bentham's time punishments varied unpredictably from prison to prison (see Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain*, pp. 109–13).

stark relief, destroying its anonymity and the accompanying illusion that the prisoner is the only component of the system free to make responsible or irresponsible choices. Only by denying prisoners *all* anonymity can the prison hierarchy achieve its own complete anonymity and the attendant infallibility.

The power exercised in the hypothetically successful panoptic "community" is *politically efficient* in the sense that the prison authorities do not expose themselves to resentment or blame by exercising it. Even when punishment is necessary, it reflects badly only on prisoners; indeed, *reflection* is a fitting term for the function performed by the dark windows of the central tower. The tower and its hierarchy ceaselessly hold up a mirror to each prisoner, a mirror that reflects responsibility and prevents its assignment to any other person.

On the other hand, punishment is usually not even necessary. The more omniscient, automatic, and infallible the panoptic mechanism, the more preventive its effect. The added labor expense of punishment (as a departure from observational routine) is minimized the more constantly prisoners are aware of their observability. Punishment, or even just the reporting of irregularities, requires the hierarchy to devote inordinate attention to an individual, temporarily lowering its *economic efficiency*.

The goal is to maintain the most effective possible normalization with the least expenditure of effort, so the hierarchy must strive to uphold its image of omniscience with a minimum of actual observation. There is no need for constant watching if the appropriate level of random and sporadic observation can achieve the same prevention of abnormality. Beyond conscious promotion of a rudimentary paranoia, the hierarchy is not much interested in the *inner* workings of individual psyches. Panoptic control is an external method directed at the homogenization of *external* behavior regardless of personal psychological quirks. The private space of motivations is left to itself, but a house of mirrors is constructed "just across the border" in the public space of visible activity. It frames the only human presence at work in an otherwise mechanical power relation. The prisoner acquires a new freedom/responsibility: the freedom/responsibility to be normal.

Panoptic power, then, brings together a completely visible, distinguishable, and precisely punishable human object, and a unified, infallible, omniscient, and anonymous authoritative subject. The latter exercises power preventively, with the utmost economic and political efficiency, while the human object is led to believe that *it* alone exercises the privilege of choice and carries the burden of responsibility.⁵ This "anonymization" of authority, as Foucault and Ignatieff both point out, is in stark contrast to the grisly images and practices of punishment which lost prestige during the eighteenth century and all but disappeared during the nineteenth century.

5 Compare my comments here with James B. Rule, *Private Lives and Public Surveillance*, (New York, NY, Schocken Books, 1974), chapter 1.

Part 2

Foucault's analysis of the panoptic situation, slightly different from the foregoing, has already produced a wealth of insights into the functioning of institutions devoted to normalization or the confinement of abnormal individuals. But why are "the rest of us" so normal to begin with? How can we each feel so unique and at the same time be so uncomfortable when faced with abnormality or irregularity in our daily lives? Have we each freely chosen this seemingly magical blend of public normality and private uniqueness? Such questions have been asked before, of course, but have hardly been addressed from the perspective of panopticism.⁶ In what follows I will focus on the concept of *visibility* as it plays a part in the maintenance of normality among the already normal.

The idea of a life-path was introduced by Torsten Hägerstrand as a way to represent, and to *some extent* understand, peoples' day-to-day movements through time and space. As a representational device it is fairly straightforward (Fig. 15.3). The Earth's surface is represented (ignoring topography) by two horizontal dimensions, while time is shown by the third, vertical, dimension. Movement through time-space is represented by an arrow, the life-path.⁷ The movements and stases of an individual or group can be represented in this way at any spatio-temporal scale, from movements within a house during one hour, to migrations of whole peoples over millennia. Hägerstrand's original life-path construct was far more than just the perceptual aid described above, and numerous writers (most notably Derek Gregory and Allan Pred) have critiqued and extended its concepts and applications over the years. At present, however, it is necessary to grasp it only as a representational (not an interpretive) tool.⁸

Consider the life-path of a prisoner in the panopticon: it is *largely vertical* and *completely visible* to the authoritative subject. It does not mingle with the life-paths of other prisoners (Fig. 15.4). By contrast, our life-paths, the spatio-temporal movements of "ordinary citizens" are *not completely visible* to authorities. Nonetheless, I would like to portray the image and analysis of the panoptic prisoner as the limit case or hypothetically complete extension of a set of power relations to which we are at present only imperfectly subjected. Normal citizens are most reliably normal in the activities for which their life-paths are publicly visible.

Probably the most important difference between modern citizens and panoptic prisoners is that the former are not strictly confined, but spatially free. Thus, we may mingle with others and gain a certain anonymity, as for instance

6 See Poster, *Critical Theory, and Poststructuralism*, pp. 105–23, for the only extended treatment I have found.

7 While the person whose life-path is being described remains in one place, the arrow is vertical; any movement over space gives the arrow a finite slope, which decreases with increasing speed of movement. Projection of the life-path onto the horizontal X-Y plane gives an atemporal map of the individual's movements.

8 See especially Allan Pred, "The Choreography of Existence: Comments on Hägerstrand's Time Geography and its Usefulness," *Economic Geography*, 53, (1977): 207–21.

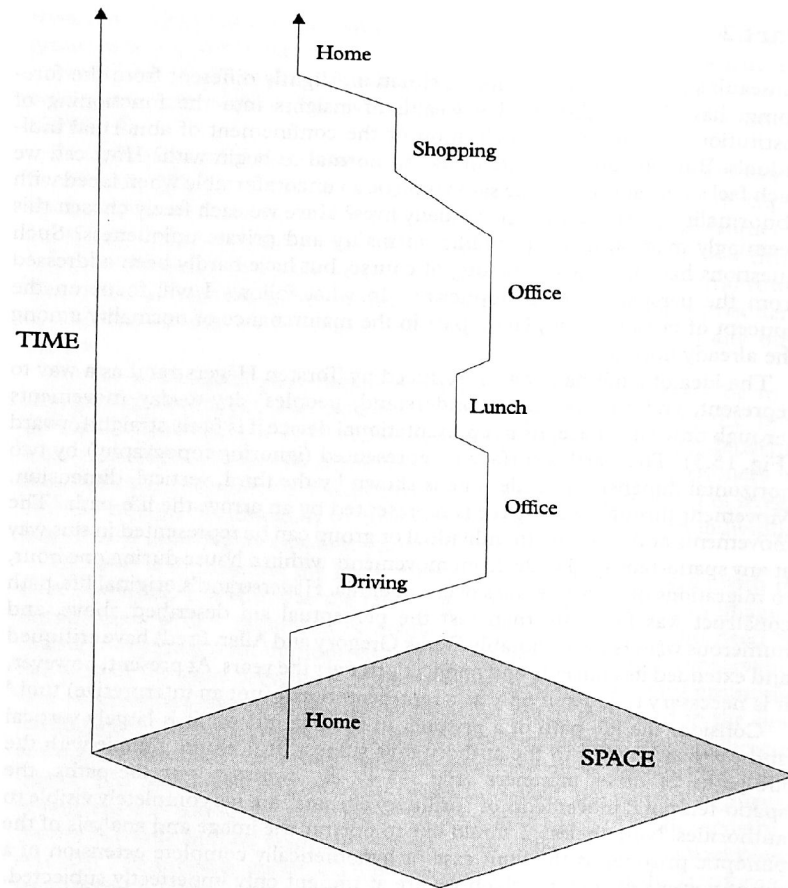


Figure 15.3 Life-path of a normal citizen

while using public transportation, watching a play, or attending a sporting event. We may pass audible wind, boo, scream obscenities, or even throw things if we are so inclined. In such situations our life-paths are bundled so closely together with others that they become indistinguishable, and our chances of being held individually responsible for deeds usually considered abnormal are slim. Some portions of our life-paths are kept invisible for the moment by tradition of law: the privacy of the home, the privacy of the bedroom or bathroom within the home, etc.

Not only observation, but judgment and enforcement as well remain imper-

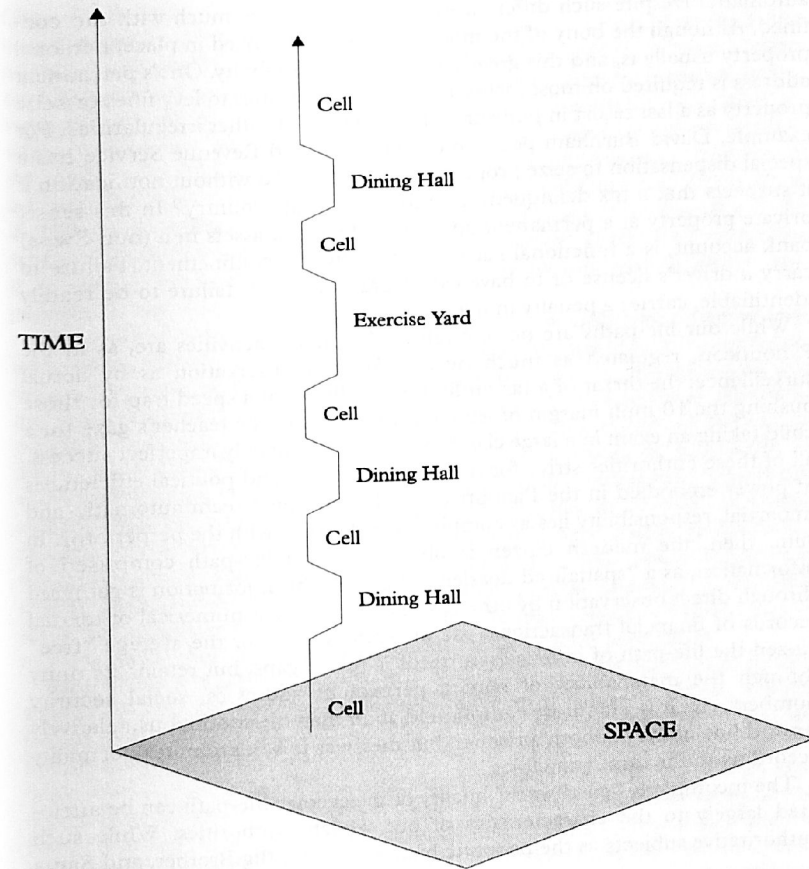


Figure 15.4 Life-path of a prisoner

fect in everyday life. We usually drive 5–10 mph over the speed limit, confident in the knowledge that the law does not have the enforcement power to judge everything technically abnormal as worthy of punishment. Thus, there is some “give” to the definition of normality. It is not too uncommon to neglect payment of speeding tickets received in other states because we are aware of the limited coordination of enforcement.

Briefly, as human objects, mainstream citizens are less spatially fixed and individually distinguishable than the panoptic prisoner. We do not suffer as constant a threat of observation, and judgment and enforcement are not strictly

automatic. Despite such differences, however, we share much with the confined. Although the body of the modern citizen is not fixed in place, personal property usually is, and this greatly enhances punishability. One's permanent address is required on most forms, and allows authorities to levy fines or seize property as a last resort in punishment for financial or other irregularities. For example, David Burnham points out that the Inland Revenue Service has a special dispensation to seize property immediately and without notification if it suspects that a tax delinquent intends to leave the country.⁹ In this sense, private property at a permanent address, or financial assets in a (non-Swiss) bank account, is a functional substitute for physical confinement. Failure to carry a driver's license or to have car insurance, that is, failure to be readily identifiable, carries a penalty in many countries.

While our life-paths are not entirely visible; many activities are, as in the Panopticon, regulated as much by the *threat* of observation as by actual surveillance: the threat of a tax audit, the possibility of a speed trap for those pushing the 10 mph margin of leniency, the threat of the teacher's gaze for a child taking an exam in a large classroom. And despite only imperfect success, all of these authorities strive for the same economic and political efficiencies of power embodied in the Panopticon. Judgment must seem automatic and impartial, responsibility lies as completely as possible with the perpetrator. In sum, then, the modern citizen is objectified in a life-path comprised of information, as a "spatialized dossier."¹⁰ Some of this information is gathered through direct observation by others, some of it exists as numerical or textual records of financial transactions, use of services, etc. For the average "free" citizen the life-path of information traces is full of gaps, but retains its unity through the matchability of names, permanent addresses, social security numbers, etc. It is a far more complicated affair than the continuous, relatively vertical line of the panoptic prisoner, but messy as it is, it promotes normality according to the same principles.¹¹

The incomplete, "patchwork" quality of the average life-path can be attributed largely to the characteristics of our *vigilant* authorities. While such authoritative subjects as the panoptic hierarchy, God, Big Brother, and Santa

9 David Burnham, "The Abuse of Power," *The New York Times Magazine*, 3 September 1989, pp. 26-7, 50, 61.

10 It is in this sense that the human subject is socially constructed. This is *not* the same as saying that there is no autonomous individuality, only that all aspects of an individual's existence that are publicly intelligible must, of necessity, take a form translatable for others (e.g., information or language). This view does not rule out "specificity," only the possibility of preserving it *as such* in communication. To the authorities, a life-path is a person, but this does not mean that the person's "essence" is exhausted by the life-path. Cf. Kenneth C. Laudon, *Dossier Society: Value Choices in the Design of National Information Systems*, (New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 1986).

11 Richard Sennett, *Authority*, (New York, NY, Random House, 1981), pp. 95-97, notes that (as in the Panopticon), in modern totalitarian societies, normality is not seen as a basis for self-possessed autonomy, but rather as the best possible state of being *in and of itself*. I wonder how "totalitarian" our democracies are in this sense ... do we still see normality as a means, or is it now an end?

Claus ("He knows when you are sleeping ...") are unified, omniscient and always capable of punishment, in "real" life we face a variety of normalizing machines, imperfectly coordinated, and each with imperfect powers. Unlike the panoptic hierarchy, these vigilant authorities are often fragmented, either vertically in relation to a particular activity, or horizontally according to different activities. By "vertical fragmentation" I mean that, for a given activity, the *three* moments in the process of normalizing surveillance (receipt of information traces, judgment and enforcement of normality) may all take place in different organizations with only imperfect communication. Use of a credit card leaves information that banks can acquire to decide whether to loan money to the user, but banks may not be able to obtain information about, say, payment of telephone or utility bills.

"Horizontal fragmentation" refers to the fact that different activities may leave information traces with different organizations, and that these organizations may not be capable, for legal or technological reasons, of exchanging and matching information regarding different activities. Government agencies, employers, financial institutions, etc. collectively hold pictures of our visible life-paths, but coordination is far from perfect, so it would be misleading to view authority as singular, unified, and effectively omniscient. The many authoritative subjects are also not entirely anonymous. In addition to a right of privacy, we can (at least in dealing with the United States government) demand to know what information is held about us or take legal action against misuse of information. We have some leeway to protest, appeal, and complain about the exercise of normalizing authority. We may demand a certain degree of balance between our visibility and that of the vigilant authorities.

Fragmented though they are, it is important to note here that vigilant authorities are becoming more coordinated in horizontal and in vertical dimensions. Credit card firms now regularly provide information to law enforcement agencies, for example, and motor vehicle administrations nationwide share information with insurance companies. Federal regulations now require all US banks to microfilm all personal checks paid, and to retain the films for five years so that federal officials may scrutinize them if they deem it necessary.¹² For the moment, it suffices to reiterate the claim that our public normality coincides with our public visibility. As *human objects* we maintain our individual unities by virtue of our awareness that some of our activities can be watched and assigned to the same person. We experience our visible life-paths as unified representations of ourselves which can, in a sense, be used against us. The unity of the authoritative subject is incomplete at best, but importantly, *complete unity of the authoritative subject is unnecessary for the reasonably successful enforcement of normality in today's society*. Only the achievement of complete visibility would require a completely unified authoritative subject. There are two deterrents to such a goal, however. First, within the Western liberal tradition

12 James Rule, Douglas McAdam, Linda Stearns and David Uglow, "Documentary Identification and Mass Surveillance in the United States," *Social Problems*, 31 (1983): 222-34.

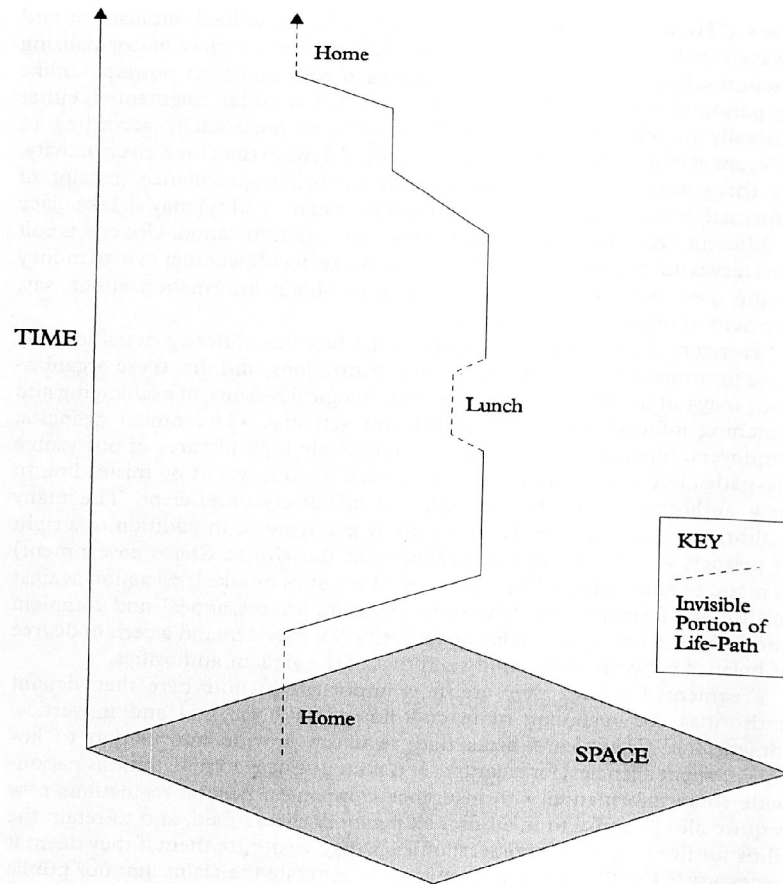


Figure 15.5 Partially visible life-path

since Adam Smith, the idea of total control has been in tension with the notion of a natural and *in principle* unknowable realm of constructive disorder not limited purely to the market.¹³ The idea that this latter realm should be exempted from the exhaustive scrutiny has limited the reach of the state, although today, private organizations are increasingly capable of covering the

13 Colin Gordon, "Governmental Rationality: An Introduction," in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, (eds), in *The Foucault Effect*, (Chicago, IL, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 14–15.

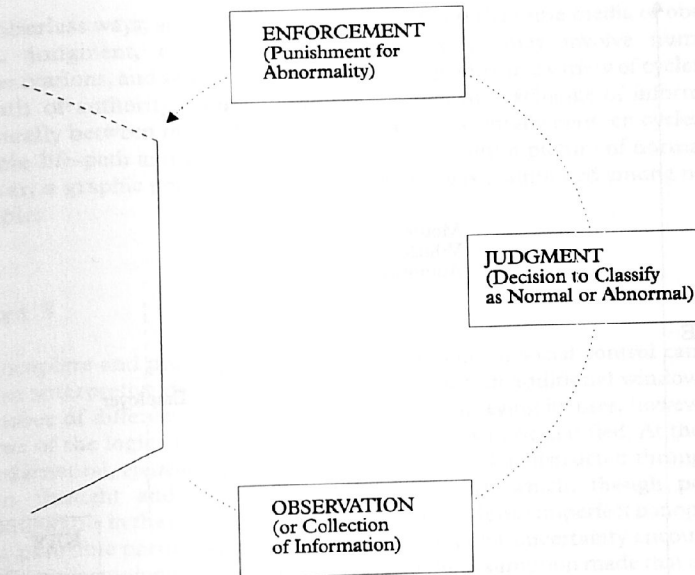


Figure 15.6 Cycle of social control

remaining ground. More important to the present argument is the ubiquity of *insurance technologies*, which protect against and profit from disorder. Panopticism may not achieve perfect coverage of individual lives, but the damages and instabilities resulting from vestigial disorder can be predicted using aggregate social statistics, and security sold (at a profit). In a sense, insurance fills the gaps in knowledge of individual lives by interpolation: the knowledge that is available (e.g. age, sex, driving record, income bracket, etc.) allows a projection of *risk* into those areas about which there is no knowledge (the future, private habits, etc.).¹⁴

Viewing modern social normality as a result of *imperfect panopticism* suggests numerous reinterpretations of familiar ideas. To give some formal coherence to these reinterpretations, it will be helpful to unify the ideas presented so far through an elaboration of the life-path diagram (Fig. 15.5). Let the solid segments of the life-path shown in Figure 15.5 represent publicly visible activities; dashed segments depict activities not subject to authoritative gazes. Each particular *visible activity* can be seen to anchor a *cycle of social control* (Fig. 15.6). A visible activity occupies a specific, finite time-space segment betrayed

14 See Francois Ewald, "Insurance and Risk," translated by Colin Gordon, in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller, (eds), *The Foucault Effect*, (Chicago, IL, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 197–210.

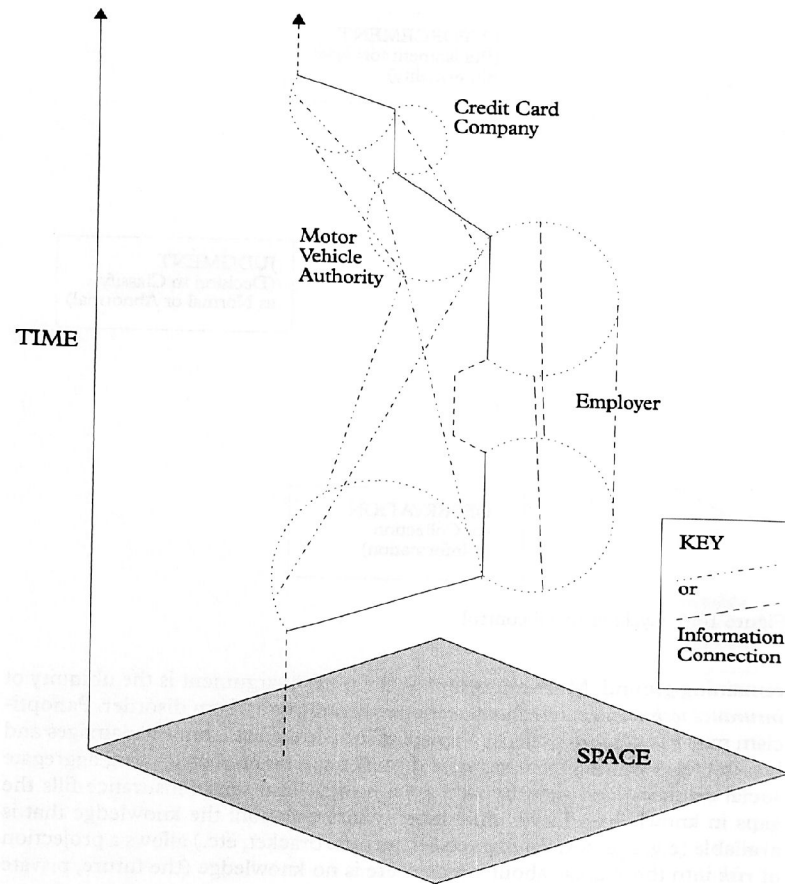


Figure 15.7 Sheath of authority

by information traces in the form of direct physical observations or data. The information may or may not be processed by a judging authority, and, even if it is judged, and judged to betray unacceptable actions, the judgment may or may not lead to punishment. Once again, the cycle does not have to be activated, or even to exist, to be effective; our awareness of its potential existence and activation usually suffices to prevent abnormalities.

The life-path of a typical individual fairly bristles with cycles of normalization similar to the one described above, forming a (figurative) *sheath of authority* around the core of physical movement (Fig. 15.7). Cycles intermesh in

numberless ways, as different activities may share the same media of observation, judgment, or enforcement. Single cycles may involve numerous organizations, and single organizations may play roles in a variety of cycles. The sheath of authority is woven together through the exchange of information vertically between moments of the cycle and horizontally between cycles. The visible life-path and its woven sheath together paint a picture of normalizing power, a graphic portrayal of the way normality is maintained among normal people.

Part 3

Incomplete and provisional though it is, this view of social control can serve as an interpretive departure point for, or at least an additional window on, a number of different research projects. Before surveying its uses, however, the status of the logic of imperfect panopticism needs to be clarified. At the most fundamental, epistemological level, it is a framework constructed through human thought and imposed on a social reality which, though possibly unknowable in the strict sense, does not seem to rule out imperfect panopticism as a plausible partial explanation. Once the inherent uncertainty encountered at the epistemological level is bracketed, and the assumption made that a social ontology is possible,¹⁵ the logic of imperfect panopticism can be situated in more familiar ways.

First, it is a "logic" because the various instances in which it appears embody in different ways a fairly stable reasoning about how control is to be achieved, the relative benefits of achieving it through observation, judgment, and enforcement as opposed to, say, corporal punishment, etc. The relative pervasiveness of this logic in "modern" societies is not an intended product of a unified, deliberate program, but rather an emergent condition, an aggregate product of similar, but not very interdependent, developments in various spheres of life. Second, imperfect panopticism is not the most basic or fundamental characteristic of modern society (Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor misunderstood Foucault on this point).¹⁶ It is not even the only form of social control we live with and through; it lies somewhere in the middle of a continuum running from cooperatively produced social norms and ideology through the legal system to physical confinement and finally military sources of control. As Foucault's work makes clear, panopticism is not entirely separate from these other types, but it certainly does not serve as their common essence. Not only do all these mechanisms of control coexist, but many of them

- 15 It would of course be irresponsible to presume unreflectively that the ways in which human knowledge is questionable do not apply to *logos* about *onta*. See U. Strohmayr and M. Hannah, "Domesticating Postmodernism," *Antipode*, 24:1 (1992), 29-55.
- 16 J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), pp. 266-93; Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in D. Couzens Hoy, (ed.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 51-68.

(imperfect panopticism included) are not simply and unambiguously *bad*. This is the third point to be stressed. Some ordering mechanisms *allow* as well as constrain various activities; in particular, many of the systems rendering modern citizens visible simultaneously facilitate important activities (for example, ATMs facilitate access to cash).

There are two broad areas in which further concrete research on imperfect panopticism could enrich our understanding of social worlds: the historical trajectory of this type of social control, and the ways it has been used, by societies in which it is already established, to control other societies. Regarding the historical trajectory of imperfect panopticism, more has been done to unearth its relatively distant origins than to trace it through the first half of the twentieth century; discussions of its immediate future are easier to find.¹⁷ The reasons for considering it an urgent issue come to the fore especially in research dealing with the near future and with the uses to which techniques of visibility have been put in episodes of imperialism. I have explored the role of rudimentary imperfect panopticism in the United States government's administration of an American Indian reservation during the 1870s, and have thereby also been able to clarify some of its spatial prerequisites in modern societies as well. Robinson and Overton have examined similar systems of control operated by imperial powers in South Africa and turn-of-the-century Kenya, respectively, albeit without attempting to pursue the theoretical implications of their "empirical" work. Taken together, these projects barely begin to scratch the surface of the vast mountain of documentary resources left behind by imperial episodes worldwide.

A focus on imperfect panopticism could impact two related *theoretical* problematics as well: the relationship between state and economic power, and the general problem of the nature and identification of classes in late capitalism. The use of refitted life-path diagrams as an instrument of analysis would allow a much clearer anatomy of the constitutive links between larger social forces and individuals. It could also bring into sharper outline the distribution of the tasks of social control between, on the one hand, state institutions and legal structures, and on the other, economic institutions, the changing forms of money, and the ownership of private property. The "authoritative sheath," or web of connections between cycles of social control discussed above, probably has fairly stable topographies for large groups of people, so some general conclusions could be drawn about the relative importance of particular authorities.

It is no doubt possible to distinguish not only typical topographies of the authoritative sheath, but also systematic differences in the *degree* of visibility between groups of people. There is a stable disparity, for instance, between the financial visibility of people and organizations who can afford to pay for

17 Rule, McAdam, Stearns and Uglow, "Documentary Identification", (1983); Laudon, *Dossier Society*, (1986); Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., "The Surveillance Society: Information Technology and Bureaucratic Social Control," *Journal of Communication*, 39, (1989), 61-76.

accountants, and that of people who cannot. Expert intervention mediates between actual activities and reported or observable versions of them in ways that *allow* disguise or deception not available to most low- and middle-income individuals. This, combined with relatively weak per capita expenditure (in countries like the United States) on enforcement of corporate financial regulations, suggests a socio-economic stratification in the dimension of visibility.¹⁸

Insofar as the notion of imperfect panopticism proves useful to geographers, it will tend to contribute to the complication of interpretive work. Individual lives are in a sense the smallest possible "localities," and thus naturally most likely to be situated and constituted in the most contingent and variable ways by combinations of social forces and processes. As a result, we tend to dismiss them as largely inaccessible to social-geographic analyses. If the framework presented here can introduce some (extremely partial) stability into interpretations at that level of contingency, it may help to expand the purview of social-geographic research.

18 See Robert Sherrill, "S&Ls, Big Banks and Other Triumphs of Capitalism," *The Nation*, 251:17, (Nov. 19, 1990), pp. 589-623. Given some empirical flesh, this line of thinking might add an important facet to debates about class and class processes.