

## Chapter 91

# Panopticon – Cybercontrol in Liquid Modernity: What Does Control Really Mean in Contemporary Management?

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### ABSTRACT

*The chapter proposes a critical analysis of the panopticon, the model of an ideal prison devised in the 18th century by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and its function in modern management. The original prison was designed in such a way that it enabled a single prison guard to watch all the inmates at all times, while the latter could never tell whether they were currently being watched or not. The idea behind the panopticon gave rise to the concept of panopticism, a philosophy developed by the French thinker Michel Foucault, which he voiced in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975/1995). Analyzing the mechanism of control through the ages, he ponders the resilience and adaptability of such concepts as discipline, training and hierarchical surveillance. I intend to provide a critical analysis of methods and techniques of organizational control applied today, in the era of liquid modernity. Since that control, more often than not, is executed nowadays by electronic surveillance equipment and computer programs, hence my term of choice – “cybercontrol”.*

### INTRODUCTION

Exercising control is one of the fundamental functions of management. Organizational structures, processes, and rules enable managers to control the chaos which could otherwise easily substitute cooperation. Over the recent decades, however, the control mechanisms have escalated beyond any reasonable proportions, becoming the modern embodiment of the original panopticon (Taylor, 2015). There is a growing tendency to monitor all employee activity (including non-work-related behavior) by means of oppressive calculating equipment which records every computer click, every second of a telephone conversation, and the exact time spent away from one's desk. Some companies take the control issue

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further still, introducing elements which can only be described as a prelude to total control: for instance, the Swedish firm Epicenter makes its employees wear microchip implants equipped with a radio locator, which – according to the company’s rhetoric - are to better safeguard their privacy (Cellan-Jones, 2015). Last but not least, there are the global internet services and networks, such as Google, Facebook and numerous others, which exercise control over billions of users, gathering personal information about their age, gender and interests, and are even able to trace, by means of the GPS system, their exact location. The services also record all search histories, e-mails, calendars, photographs and other files which become, in fact, indelible traces billions of people leave behind on servers, for anyone to use and abuse. And is not the struggle man today undertakes – raging, in the name of reclaiming his freedom, against the machine, our desperate attempt to save the virtues of humanism in the face of the imminent mutation of man into the cyborg? Armin Grunwald (2014) conducted research regarding the future based on narrative methods; he noted that modern stories and fantasies about the future, if you apply the hermeneutical method, tell us not so much about the future, as about the present - our emotions, fears, and values, here and now. Hermeneutics – as postulated in *Being and Time* by Martin Heidegger (2008), then followed by Hans Georg Gadamer (2004) and Paul Ricoeur (1981) – sets a new ontological dimension where “being” means trying to understand oneself and the world. I too have decided to follow that track and through the hermeneutics of the term panopticon, entangled in a number of multifaceted contexts, arrive at a new translation of the word, more adequate perhaps in our era of liquid modernity - omnipotent cybercontrol. In this new context even certain serious and prestigious scientific projects such as the Global Brain, with its attributes of omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence (Heylighen, 2013) may raise ethical doubts and be viewed as yet another tool encouraging omnipotent control.

## **THE PANOPTICON: THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE IDEA**

When writing about the pandemic of the Black Plague in medieval and post-medieval Europe, Foucault (1995) noted that it had brought into being certain rituals of exclusion and disciplinary patterns. As a simultaneously real and symbolic embodiment of chaos, it demanded an immediate antidote in the form of order. The fear of “contagion” – with a disease, rebellion, crime, and any kind of deviation from social order, which in itself is a cultural construct and a narrative of power - - has always been a sufficient reason for implementing an extra measure of order, understood chiefly as discipline and oppression. One of the most effective methods in this respect was exclusion – the task fulfilled in society by mental institutions, correctional facilities, penal colonies, and even partly hospitals, which propagated a binary system based on opposites: normal vs. abnormal, safe vs. dangerous, etc. The panopticon is a model of an ideal prison devised in the 18th century by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, and constitutes an architectural, tangible rendition of that exclusion and discipline implementation. The original prison was designed in such a way that it enabled a single prison guard to watch all the inmates at all times, while the latter could never tell whether they were currently being watched or not. Bentham’s key premise was as follows: authority must be felt and visible at all times, without ever being verifiable. The central situation of the watchtower, the lighting in the prison cells, all that was intended to make the prisoner aware of being continuously under surveillance, but he was never supposed to be able to tell whether he

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