

Assessment or Surveillance? Panopticism and Higher Education

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Article abstract

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Assessment or Surveillance? Panopticism and Higher Education

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Abstract: In this paper, we explore Jeremy Bentham's panopticon and consider its possible contribution to understanding more fully the impact of current assessment protocols and practices within higher education. More pointedly, we ask the following question: Are the plethora of assessment practices within higher education actually designed to improve student academic experience, or are they instead mechanisms of surveillance intended to control, dominate and invoke paranoia among university workers? In response to this question, we argue that the prevailing preoccupation with assessment in U.S. universities is motivated less by a genuine desire to enhance the actual academic experience of students than it is to offer hegemonic interests a psychological instrument of control to eliminate potential dissent over neo-liberal and managerial class imposed policies. To illustrate our central claim, we first review some general details of Bentham's panopticon. Secondly, we briefly discuss Foucault's analysis of the panopticon and consider his accompanying postulate on the tendency of individuals to self-regulate their behavior according to externally imposed and monitored expectations. We also examine in greater depth the relationship between the panopticon and the Lacanian gaze, with a focus on considering the latter's psychological impact. Finally, we contend that the prevailing obsession with assessment in universities is a mechanism of institutional control that hinders rather than enhances the academic quality of contemporary higher education by limiting the scope of academic dialogue, social imagination and democratic structural critique.

Introduction

When we arrived at a U.S. public university from other national jurisdictions several years ago, we were surprised to learn about an assessment procedure for college administrators metaphorically referred to as a “three-sixty”. In this particular type of evaluation, merely one element – albeit a significant one – within a comprehensive system of institutional assessment, administrators are evaluated every three years by all personnel with whom they have contact. The notion of a 360-degree system of assessment immediately sent our collective thoughts drifting back to Jeremy Bentham (1969) and his infamous architectural panopticon.

Most frequently conceptualized as a prison structure, the panopticon was designed so that incarcerated individuals would live under the constant gaze of a centrally located watchtower. Bentham (1969) understood very well, however, that the design of the prison was far less about facilitating the direct supervision of inmates than it was about gaining a certain type of psychological control over the targeted population. The dispositional effect of the panopticon actually mirrors, to some extent, the psychological impact of the Lacanian “gaze” (Krips, 2010, p. 94). For Jacques Lacan, the gaze as metaphor signifies the obviation of human subjectivity, as the outward stare is reflected back toward

the subject in an act of constant observation (Aoki, 2000). As philosopher Slavoj Žižek points out, “paranoia is an accompanying factor of the Gaze; the notion of an omnipresent eye that fixates the subject” (Carlsson, 2012, p. 3).

In this essay, we want to explore Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon and consider its possible contribution to understanding more fully the impact of current assessment protocols and practices within higher education. More pointedly, we ask the following question: Are the plethora of assessment practices within higher education actually designed to improve student academic experience, or are they instead mechanisms of surveillance intended to control, dominate and invoke paranoia among university workers? In response to this question, we argue that the prevailing preoccupation with assessment in higher education is motivated less by a genuine desire to enhance the actual academic experience of students than it is to offer hegemonic interests a psychological instrument of control to eliminate potential dissent over managerial class imposed policies.

To illustrate our central claim, we first review some general details of Bentham’s panopticon. Secondly, we briefly discuss Foucault’s analysis of the panopticon and consider his accompanying postulate on the tendency of individuals to self-regulate their behavior according to externally imposed and monitored expectations. We also examine in greater depth the relationship between the panopticon and the Lacanian gaze, with a focus on considering the latter’s psychological impact. Finally, we contend that the prevailing obsession with assessment in universities is a mechanism of institutional control that hinders rather than enhances the academic quality of contemporary higher education by limiting the scope of academic dialogue, social imagination and democratic structural critique.

The Panopticon

Jeremy Bentham, a predecessor to the influential J. S. Mill, was an eighteenth-century utilitarian philosopher who believed that people are basically hedonistic and their corresponding desire to experience pleasure and avoid pain influences virtually all human judgments and behavior patterns. To quote Bentham directly, “Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do” (2007, p. 14). Bentham argued that human beings, under normal circumstances, predictably seek out ways to avoid potential punishment from those who have control and jurisdiction over their lives. As the potential for detection and punishment increases, the level of behavior outside the imposed imperatives tends to decrease.

When confronted with the challenge of designing a prison reflecting these utilitarian assumptions, Bentham proposed a circular configuration intended to exploit the hedonistic tendencies of human nature. By proposing this design, Bentham extended his utilitarian thinking into the architectural institutional design referred to as the panopticon:

The building circular—the cells occupying the circumference—the keepers, etc.—the centre—an intermediate annular well, all the way up, crowned by a sky-light usually open, answering the purpose of a ditch in fortification, and the chimney in ventilation—the cells laid open by an iron grating. (1969, pp. 194–195)

Interestingly, the design Bentham describes was not entirely original, but instead was adapted from the

structural design of a factory previously observed by his brother Samuel during a visit to Russia. The design of the factory was intended to minimize the amount of in-person supervision required to control workers by posing the threat of constant surveillance (Steadman, 2012).

Although Bentham's version of the panopticon is most frequently associated with prisons, he proposed the same architectural design for workhouses, mental asylums and even schools (Warrior, Roberts & Lewis, 2002). Ostensibly, the panopticon operates on the principle of constant potential surveillance by employing a central watchtower enclosed in glass and furnished with wooden blinds so prisoners, workers, or students cannot see inside, but the "keepers," or those responsible for imposing discipline, can see everything on the outside. The central watchtower is surrounded by a 360-degree cellblock structure, or classrooms in the case of schools, with every cell or classroom exposed to the view from the centrally located watchtower (Steadman, 2012).

Consistent with Bentham's hedonistic assumptions about human behavior, the underlying psychological strategy behind the panopticon is the angst and/or paranoia it generates among those falling within its purview. Although people cannot actually identify their watchers with precision at any given time—similar to the frequent anonymity afforded assessors in various higher education assessment practices—the threat of potential exposure and/or punishment is omnipresent. Even when individuals are not being directly observed, there is no assured privacy from potential surveillance. Within this type of environment, the psychological influence of constant surveillance on those being watched, consistent with Bentham's utilitarian assumptions, encourages individuals to avoid potential pain by conforming with prevailing institutional expectations.

Foucault, Power and the Panopticon

The potential implications of Bentham's panopticon beyond the limits of mere architectural design are most fully explored in the work of Michel Foucault (1977). In his view, the panopticon is not simply a model that reveals the psychological impact of a prison design, but instead it accurately illustrates the mechanism by which social structures and surveillance operate to control and manipulate individuals ideologically. Foucault suggests, "The panopticon is the diagram of mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system; it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use" (Foucault, 1977, p. 205).

Foucault (1977) highlights the relationship between surveillance as a hegemonic process and the corresponding enhanced social control it affords over individuals. Given the capacity for constant surveillance, the panopticon provides a prototypical model for generating the anxiety that encourages individuals to self-regulate their behavior to conform with prevailing ideological expectations. The model provides an effective mechanism or framework to exercise power regardless of the person standing behind that structure. The panopticon offers Foucault an effective metaphor to reveal the symbiotic relationship between ideological systems of social control and those holding political and/or epistemological power. He describes the psychological control achieved through panopticism as follows:

The major effect of the panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility

that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (p. 205)

According to Foucault, then, behavior control over individuals is achieved not through constant actual surveillance, but rather through the panoptic discipline of constant potential surveillance, thereby inducing a paranoid population to conform through the recognition of this possibility. As a result of this paranoia, populations self-regulate to eternally imposed norms.

The Lacanian Gaze and Self-Policing

Within the panopticon of higher education, the practices of teachers, learners and administrators are constantly scrutinized and their performance constantly assessed. The “gaze” is constant and the object’s consciousness of being potentially observed at all times predictably produces various debilitating psychological effects. Through the architectural machinery of academic assessment, the gaze “dissociates the see/being seen dyad” and renders power and authority automatic (Sharpe, n.d.). The object of the gaze is “dis-individualized,” creating the Lacanian problem of being unable to separate the “I” from the “other” with the resulting loss of subjective autonomy. Instead, the reflexive “I” causes education professionals to see themselves as a reflection or object of the systems of surveillance they endure, and inevitably creates psychological anxieties regarding their professional roles, job performance and institutional status (Krips, 2010). Paranoia and job insecurity result in the automatic transfer of power from an autonomous professional to an ideological mechanism of control that prompts widespread self-policing.

Self-policing is primarily achieved through what Foucault and Lacan both understand as the reflections of an ideologically constructed reality staring back at the subject. This reflected gaze causes the subject to regulate or discipline his or her behavior accordingly. As Foucault (1977) observes:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (pp. 202–203)

Foucault argues that the panopticon is designed for the subject to become an object of information rather than an active agent in communication. The gaze of the assessment panopticon distorts academic identity by reshaping what it means to be an educator in higher education and simultaneously denying the discourse of academic freedom. According to Pinar (2004), for example, educators accordingly assume a position of “gracious submission” to the power dichotomies of the academy (p. 220).

In Lacan’s view, the reflexive gaze creates a “blind spot” where what we perceive as reality and the struggle to conform to the perceived reality is an ideological distortion (Žizek, 1989, p. 79). For example, in higher education, performance is measured by subjective evaluations of quality and institutional improvement based on economic rationales for labor market skills training, technological innovation and testing success. Assessment as a tool of neo-liberal ideology creates a distortion in focus

that sustains hegemonic values through surveillance mechanisms. The preoccupation with this distorted reality and the corresponding self-policing create academic professionals who no longer scrutinize the mechanisms of educational bureaucracy through the exercise of academic freedom.

Panopticism and Higher Education

The psychological strength of the panopticon rests in the ability to intimidate, control and invoke paranoia among those individuals under potential surveillance (Foucault, 1977). Although the notion of the 360-degree assessment mentioned in the introduction may be the most obvious university surveillance system related to panopticism, assessment is ubiquitous within contemporary post-secondary education. Within the modern university, professors assess students, students assess professors, administrators assess professors and other administrators, professors assess administrators, professors assess each other, the state assesses the university, and accreditation organizations assess many disciplines—indeed, the list of assessment processes seems virtually endless. So we now return to the central question of the essay: With all of these accountability and assessment procedures, where is the actual detectable improvement in higher education?

In answering the above question regarding education quality, we contend it would be very difficult to mount an evidentiary case that contemporary universities embracing the assessment fetish are, broadly speaking, superior to their predecessor institutions. To the contrary, a recent article in the New York Times highlights nicely the widespread decline of academic quality at U.S. universities:

In a typical semester, for instance, 32 percent of the [undergraduate] students did not take a single course with more than 40 pages of reading per week, and 50 percent did not take any course requiring more than 20 pages of writing over the semester.... Not surprisingly, a large number of the students showed no significant progress on tests of critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing... Why is the quality of education so poor?... [S]tudents are taught by fewer full-time tenured faculty members... [A]cademic investments are a lower priority.... Too many institutions ... rely primarily on student course evaluations to assess teaching. This creates perverse incentives for professors to demand little and give out good grades. (Arum & Roksa, 2011)

Indeed, the belief that course evaluations, based on problematic assumptions about teaching and learning, afford a useful measure of teacher quality offers a lucid illustration of Foucault's postulate on the relationship between truth and power. The inferred quality of a faculty member's teaching — in this case the aggregate scores and abstracted narrative comments on course evaluation forms — is linked in a circular relationship with a system of power; that is, the university's promotion and tenure process. The regime that defines "truth," is precisely the same administrative body that achieves institutional control over a specified population on the basis of that definition.

The entire promotion and tenure assessment process within higher education offers a potential mechanism of control that generates junior faculty deference to prevailing institutional culture. Indeed, peer review, as part of the panopticonic "gaze" on subjectivity, reduces non-conformity by formalizing institutional punishment for those who drift beyond what is deemed acceptable standards of behavior. For example, Stanley Aronowitz (1997) suggests:

Most faculty have long since capitulated to the strictures of the conservative disciplines and the civility and professionalization demanded by academic culture. They disdain any discourse or activity that cannot be coded as civil—institutional power continues to reward conformity. (p. 98)

The controlling force of university surveillance is perhaps more pointedly expressed by Douglas Aoki (2001) who argues, “The academic subject is thereby compelled to repeatedly act within that system, in accordance with its demands, to maintain the image of an academic in its institutional gaze” (p. 361).

Granted, through massification, the dubious neo-liberal growth strategy pursued by university chief executive officers (CEOs) for the past twenty-five years, there are more students than ever before enrolled in higher education, but the quality of their academic experience is highly suspect. As the New York Times article points out, the increased use of adjuncts, a customer service approach to educating students and administrative blight (i.e., the investment in buildings and managers rather than academics) have all detracted considerably from the overall quality of student academic experience. J. J. Kidd (2005) nicely articulates this decline:

American higher education has lost its bearings.... I believe the system has developed serious flaws that interfere with its ability to develop in our young people the depth of critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and human understanding so essential for dealing with the problems in our world today. (p. 195)

One of us recently attended a university luncheon where the institution’s president made the case—consistent with newly imposed state assessment metrics—that the growth model of higher education was now considered an unqualified failure. Ironically, the same individual failed to notice—or at least failed to mention—that the CEO model of a university president that supports him and his corresponding half-million-dollar-plus-bonuses salary enthusiastically pursued the enrollment growth approach to higher education by imposing neo-liberal economic assumptions on education. In the final analysis, the lasting legacy of the entire neo-liberal experiment in higher education is a faculty often silenced and politically disempowered by the widespread panopticism invoked across the university sector.

By their very nature, universities as traditionally conceived pose a potential threat to hegemonic interests that dominate cultural consciousness with a monolithic message supporting neo-liberal ideology. The plethora of evaluation and assessment practices surrounding universities merely encourage widespread political conformity among academics. The contemporary university milieu, almost completely removed from its traditional role as a forum for democratic dialogue and structural critique, has become another instrument to promote the cultural drift toward unquestioned neo-liberal assumptions about human experience. The multitude of assessment mechanisms centralize administrative control over faculty and increasingly shift the role of university professors from autonomous intellectuals to institutional conformists, thereby granting politicians, university presidents and governing boards complete control over academic policies and university culture.

Conclusion

Jeremy Bentham envisioned the panopticon primarily as a prison, but Foucault understood the design

as a perfect symbol for modern surveillance societies. The panopticon provides a metaphor for power and control operating through a variety of institutional apparatuses that leave individuals feeling threatened and paranoid, never certain if they are actually being watched, but knowing structures are in place to monitor their behavior at all times. We have argued above that the plethora of current university assessment protocols afford such a mechanism within higher education to monitor and discipline faculty. The predictable result is increasingly passive faculty unwilling to exercise their full spectrum of academic freedom and collegial governance responsibilities. This system of surveillance poses a direct threat to the democratic role of universities as sites for structural critique and social reform. As faculty we have a democratic responsibility to resist the charade of assessment and accountability, and point out the real purpose of these practices; they are clearly mechanisms of panopticonic surveillance, ideological manipulation and political control.

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