A Critique of Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon”

In 1787 the English Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham wrote “Panopticon,” in which he proposed that prisons, schools, and other kinds of establishments be constructed in such a way that the persons being supervised within could be kept under constant surveillance. Although Bentham’s idea never became reality, “Panopticon” remains of interest because recent efforts by businesses and government agencies to monitor people’s activities appear to mirror many aspects of his proposal.

Written as a series of letters intended for the English government and large private institutions, “Panopticon” argues that certain kinds of people require constant observation. Theseincludeprison and insane asylum inmates, hospital patients, students, work house employees, and so on. According to Bentham, the more complete the surveillance, the more effectively the institutions of which they were a part could perform their functions. He acknowledged that constant observation is a physical impossibility, but he argued that it can be sufficiently complete so that people will always have the suspicion that they are being watched, even if they’re not (469).

Given the level of technology available in the 1780s, Bentham’s idea could probably have been readily implemented by the institutions that were his audience. Furthermore, it is apparent from the clarity of his writing that he had given his proposal a great deal of thought, and his arguments are therefore both clear and forceful. However, he seems to leave one important element of his argument undeveloped—the question of who is to keep watch of those conducting the surveillance. This is probably less an omission on Bentham’s part than a reflection of his attitude regarding the English social
class structure. Simply put, the higher a person in the social classes, the less the need to observe his or her behavior.

Apart from the technical merits of “Panopticon,” Bentham’s proposal is open to much evaluation and questioning. One of the most obvious objections raised by today’s critics is to the idea of surveillance itself. Is it really a good idea, they ask, to erect a system in which virtually everyone is being watched by their employers or government? Such a question is certainly legitimate, but a more valuable exercise might be to accept Bentham’s premise and then apply it to the institutions he hoped would benefit from its use. In other words, if “Panopticon” had ever been adopted, would it have fulfilled his objectives?

One of the main applications of Bentham’s design was to be the prison system, in which prisoners were to be isolated in individual cells, each being kept under the constant surveillance of the prison warden’s officers. Left unclear, however, was the purpose behind such surveillance. Why would it be necessary to constantly watch prisoners who are languishing in solitary confinement? What kind of behavior is the surveillance supposed to correct?

It is possible, of course, that the observation is meant to deter attempted prison escapes. Or perhaps Bentham believed that constant observation would be an added form of punishment for the prisoners. Neither explanation is completely adequate, since the most obvious way to address the first problem is to build prisons from which it is extremely difficult to escape. If Bentham’s goal was to punish the prisoners, this objective was at variance with his effort to make prisons more humane, of which “Panopticon” was a part. Whatever the purpose, it is evident that such a surveillance system would be surprisingly ineffective in a prison setting.

The same cannot be said for hospitals, another candidate for Bentham’s idea. Indeed, it is conceivable that patients themselves would welcome his system, since it would provide an added measure of security for the lives of people with grave illnesses.
and injuries. Surveillance would be much less necessary for patients whose lives are not in serious danger, and in fact it would really serve no genuinely useful purpose. For hospitals, then, Bentham’s system would have at least partial effectiveness.

In the case of insane asylums, however, surveillance would be futile at best. Bentham’s proposal was based on the idea that people will modify their behavior if they think they are being watched, but such an assumption has no validity in the case of the insane. Even if they were aware they were being observed, it is doubtful that mentally deranged persons would either care or respond in a positive manner. It is possible that asylum workers could use Bentham’s surveillance system to watch for outbreaks of violence, but clearly it would be preferable for asylum employees to be working on the spot for that purpose, rather than isolating themselves in an observation post.

Bentham also intended that his idea be used in two other settings—schools and places of employment. His choice of these locations continues to be controversial, for the simple reason that his surveillance system would affect a much wider group of people than just those who are confined or in hospitals. Again, however, the primary question is whether his idea would work the way he intended.

It is immediately apparent that educating children in Bentham’s system would be extremely inefficient, especially if each student was confined to a room by him or herself. Children would either require individual instruction (thus resulting in the hiring of literally millions of teachers) or else the person doing the surveillance would also have to be the teacher. In the latter case, the students would need to see and interact with the teacher-observer, which would completely nullify one of the main pillars of the system, that the observer be unseen.

Modifying the system so that students were in classrooms rather than individual cells would have little impact on the effectiveness of the surveillance. If an entire class is being observed, then an obvious question arises: Who is being watched—the students, the teacher, or both? Since the students are already being supervised by the teacher, watching
them would seem to be redundant. As for the teachers, it is highly unlikely that they would simply sit at their desks and while away the hours, even if they knew they were not being watched. Surveillance of students, therefore, would be almost completely useless.

Such would probably not be true for the observation of employees, who require much more supervision than do teachers. However, given that Bentham’s system was designed to ensure maximum work efficiency, it is by no means clear that surveillance is the best way to go about it. It completely ignores the potentially harmful psychological effects that constant observation may have on employees, which could range from resentment to low work morale. Such feelings are hardly conducive to the creation of an efficient work environment, and thus Bentham’s system could actually prove more harmful to businesses than helpful.

“Panopticon” is both ambitious and flawed. In it Bentham proposes a radical solution to problems that are still with us today, and for which there are no satisfactory answers. The Benthamite idea of constant surveillance is tempting for businesses and governments that desire complete obedience from the people they employ or rule, but it ignores the fact that people are not so easy to control. Indeed, even if such a system could be implemented, it would likely fail. Perhaps it was for this reason that England never adopted Bentham’s proposal, which remains but one argument in an ongoing debate that will continue for years to come.
Works Cited