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Surveillance, Knowledge and Inequality: Understanding Power Through Foucault and Beyond

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Introduction

Power is a concept that has been at the heart of many academic and public debates for as long as observers have been focusing their attention on the social world. Over the years, many different theories of power have been offered up which look at power from different standpoints, frameworks, and theoretical bases, each arriving at a slightly different conception of what we should mean when using “power” as a concept in the social sciences. The modern debates regarding power, and how to conceptualize it, are often traced back to the works of philosophers like Aristotle, who looked at locations of power in political societies and distinguished between rational (abilities to be exercised at will) and natural (dispositions of objects or individuals) types of power (Morriss, 2002, p. 24; Dahl, 2002, p. 9), Hobbes, who looked at what power is and how it is ordered, or Machiavelli, who looked instead at what power does and the various strategies which it entails (Clegg, 1989, p. 5). Each one of these approaches to defining and explaining power brings something new to the table, and perhaps not surprisingly, there tends to be a clash between these various approaches.

For instance, there is a good deal of work that takes power as something which is exercised over others, with definitions such as “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl, 1957, pp. 201-202), or “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests” (Lukes, 2005, p. 37). This concept of “power over” others is certainly not a wrong way of looking at power, as this is a very natural tendency to put one over another in the context of a social relation (Morriss, 2002, p. 32). However, this single way of considering power leaves out a whole host of things and acts which exemplify a more general sense of “power to” do something, such as “the power to make our views known to our elected representatives” (Morriss, 2002, p. 33). This distinction also makes clear the potential problem of only considering power when it is being exercised, such as making decisions, in what Peter Morriss calls the “exercise fallacy,” because even when not being utilized we might consider an individual, group, etc. to still have power (2002, p. 15). Likewise, we might look at power both in the decision making process, and the lack of decision making, perhaps in a political setting, in which case not acting is an example of power (Lukes, 2005, p. 22). While these two approaches to defining power are quite different, they both help to add to our understanding of the overall concept.

Another example of a contention that adds to our understanding of power, is the division between structure and agency. Starting in the late 1960s and continuing on to today, there has been a contention within the Marxist tradition of power studies and theory based on the works of Ralph Miliband and Nicos Poulantzas. Miliband took the position in *The State In Capitalist Society*, that state structures serve the interests of the capitalist classes because they were composed of capitalist class members who acted towards this end (1969; Lukes, 2005). This approach considers the agency of human actors as the important aspect when it comes to the basis of power. On the other hand, Poulantzas offers a structural critique to this agency approach. Instead of focusing on individuals as the basis of power, Poulantzas holds

that “the state is defined as the instance that maintains the cohesion of a social formation and which reproduces the conditions of production of a social system by maintaining class domination” (1969, p. 77). In other words, the state structures themselves have the power, and operate in a similar fashion to benefit the capitalist class regardless of who fills the individual positions within the system. We can find this line of reasoning at play in the work of Gramsci (1971), who emphasizes the importance of overthrowing not only the state and its members, but also the ideological basis of the state (that which can reproduce the same class structures and patterns of power), when it comes to successful revolutions and social movements. So which concept of power is the best? Should we only think of power in terms of individuals and their actions, or should we look to the structures of our society for a better understanding of power and related inequalities? Again, we see that a one sided approach to power is probably not the best way to go, and ultimately it may be that we need to look at both structure and agency, just as we should consider both a “power over” and a “power to,” in order to gain a full understanding of power as it exists and plays out in our social world.

These contentions within the examination of power are not brought up to confuse or to belittle the understanding of this important concept. Instead, we look at these disagreements in order to show that there are a multitude of different ways to approach the issue. According to Robert Dahl, in a fictionalized conversation between two social researchers, power is very much relative in that it can be looked at and studied in many different ways, and looks different across time and cultures. And yet, it is important to find common threads between the various approaches and instances, in order to show that power as a social concept is consistent enough to compare and incorporate into studies of social life (Dahl, 1957, p. 214). In this current paper, the examination of power will utilize one such thread of similarity between various approaches, knowledge, and will be specifically examined by looking at a force which produces knowledge in relation to power and inequality: surveillance.

Power, Knowledge and Surveillance

In his examination and definition of power, Michel Foucault writes that “there can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association” (1986, p. 229). What Foucault is getting at here, is the importance of knowledge, and the “imposition of particular knowledge as truth” (Haugaard, 2002, p. 185; Foucault, 2002) when it comes to the existence and exercise of power in nearly every social relation. In other words, power is knowledge, and in order to discover who in a particular situation has power, we must first look to who is creating and disseminating the “truth” of the situation, looking at how this “truth” is used to pacify others (Haugaard, 2002, p. 185; Foucault, 2002). This concept of pacification, and discipline, will be expanded upon later in this paper, but for now, it is key to understand that in all types of power relations, knowledge plays an important role. For instance, if we go back to a basic concept of “power over” (*A* getting *B* to do something, etc.), then we see that in order for one actor to have power over another, there must be some knowledge of the individual over whom power is had, or else the power relationship may not exist. If for example, actor *A* does not have knowledge about the behaviors or dispositions of actor *B* (perhaps *B* has a hidden cache of political influence/relationships), it might end up that *B* will be unaffected by the attempt at power from *A*. Likewise, if we look at power as a structural phenomenon, it would be important for a social structure like the state (or the individuals with agency within them if you take an agency approach) to have knowledge of those about whom it is making decisions, and to be able to create certain knowledge which can then become a social “truth” (Foucault, 2002). Such things as economic or civil unrest, if they are unknown to decision makers, might end up derailing the decisions which are made, and as such it would benefit those with power to be able to shape the discourse on civil unrest among the population (Foucault, 2002). This

seems to be what Foucault is getting at with his discussion of the “art of government,” or governmentality, when he talks about analyses and tactics which are made based on a certain body of knowledge, which is often political and economic in nature (1991, pp. 92-102). If we take knowledge as a fundamental aspect of power, it becomes important then to look more closely at the mechanisms through which knowledge can be produced, and through which power itself can come to bear. In this instance, taking yet another page from Foucault, the mechanism of importance which we will look at is surveillance.

Defining surveillance is a bit more of a straight forward task than defining power, but it still has its fair share of diversity in this regard. In a more general definition, surveillance includes any number of activities in the “collection and storage of information (presumed to be useful) about people or objects” (Dandeker, 1994, p. 37). This could include any number of things, from basic sensory observations (sight, smell, touch, etc.), to more complex modes of technological information collection such as drones, thermal imaging or data mining utilizing computer programs. Another aspect to a definition of surveillance, which is hinted at by our general concept above, is that there is a degree of intention related to the act of surveillance. For instance, when talking about surveillance we are often brought into discussions of “supervision,” issuing instructions, monitoring for specific behaviors/actions, and regulating or governing behavior (Dandeker, 1994, p. 37; Gilliom and Monahan, 2013); surveillance is by definition used of some purpose. These conceptions of surveillance appear to bring the practice into a close relationship with the concept of power. For instance, In Jeremy Bentham’s discussion of the panopticon, he defines surveillance as “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind” (Mattelart, 2010, p. 7), which is a conception picked up and used by others, including Foucault in his use of the panopticon to illustrate discipline. Surveillance itself then constitutes and supports power, and those with power, in a few different ways, mainly in the constitution of both productive and repressive power.

The difference between productive and repressive power is similar to the difference between “power over” and “power to.” Repressive power is “power which prevents specific behaviors” (Hornqvist, 2011, p. 13), and is exemplified in such things as the relationship between police officers and criminals, or between parents and punishing children to prevent them from say taking cookies from the cookie jar. This is very much akin to “power over,” in that the emphasis is on keeping someone from doing what they might otherwise want to do, and limiting their ability to act in the first place (Morris, 2002; Hornqvist, 2011). On the other hand, we have productive power, which emphasizes the production of specific behaviors (Hornqvist, 2011, p. 13). This type of power motivates people to behave in a certain fashion, giving people the “competence to act” in this fashion, without necessarily having an iron fisted approach or utilizing a sheer dominating force (Hornqvist, 2011, p. 13). In this way, productive power is more similar to “power to,” in that it enables people to carry out a behavior, albeit one which they might not themselves have thought of or even desired to carry out. There is therefore, a similarity of productive power to the ideological concepts of Poulantzas and Gramsci as discussed above. Productive power also gets away from the “zero sum” concept, in that it does not require one individual to lose power when another gains it, but rather that both parties can benefit from the interaction (Clegg and Haugaard, 2009, p. 31). And so, for Foucault, the productive and repressive forms of power are the most important, and are both constituted by and intertwined with surveillance.

The Panopticon and Beyond

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) focuses much of his discussion on the ways in which power and surveillance are related, and uses the concept of the panopticon in order to do this. Foucault uses the panopticon as an “ideal type” of a structure of power relations between people. The panopticon, initially conceived of by Bentham, was a model for

a prison involving a central tower (within which are the overseers) and a series of rooms/cells arranged in a circle around it (Foucault, 1977). A prisoner is isolated in each of these rooms, which can all be observed from the central tower, but the individual prisoner never knows when he is being observed, so as to “arrange things so that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action [thus] the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). Basically, what Foucault pulls out of this system of surveillance, is that the goal is to get the prisoners to turn their gaze inwards and discipline themselves and produce a modified behavior, thus making it unnecessary to actually practice repressive forms of power. While it might seem on its face that this form of surveillance, which involves a prison, is particularly repressive, Foucault demonstrates that the panoptic surveillance has much more of an emphasis on productive power through this modification of behavior. This example shows us that surveillance, and the development of knowledge/truth, can have both repressive and productive power intertwined with it.

Power, both repressive and productive, is also constituted by, and related to, other forms of surveillance, not just this panoptic conception. And this is a good thing, as it allows us to step beyond this seemingly fixed conception of a prison, and into the realm of more flexible, mobile and decentralized forms of surveillance and power. With the panoptic model, we see surveillance built into a rigid central system (Foucault, 1977); however, surveillance, especially in the modern day is much less fixed, even if it is built into social systems of power and control. For instance, when we consider something like the military, and its use of surveillance in the form of aerial drones, it appears that structure matters more than the actual agency practiced by those who operate these surveillance technologies. The military, which according to Weber is a form of bureaucracy, has the activities required for its operation, including surveillance, “distributed in a fixed way as official duties” (Weber, 1958, p. 196). This does not mean however that surveillance via drones, which can be deployed nearly anywhere on earth, is fixed in its operation (Mattelart, 2010; Gilliom and Monahan, 2013). However, when it comes to the way that power is constituted in this example, the structure is more important. For example, the drone operator may actually carry out the surveillance, but they themselves do not own the military drone, nor do they make the decision about who/what to observe or whether or not to use force (repressive power in the form of missiles, etc.), these decisions are made by those in positions above them in the bureaucratic structure. And so, regardless of who is in the position of carrying out the surveillance, or even making the decisions, the military system will operate in a similar fashion. And so, both in fixed and flexible forms, surveillance has the potential to be repressive when involved in social structures, for instance missile attacks from a drone, or tickets issued by a traffic camera, are reminiscent of the heavy handed approaches to power and surveillance utilized by feudal regimes of the past (Foucault, 1977). But this is not to say that surveillance cannot also constitute productive power outside of the panopticon.

The control of surveillance mechanisms in social systems is also a major source of productive power in the modern day, and not just in the realm of discipline and behavior modification. For example, surveillance of people, goods, machines and even weather, is of central importance in modern air travel. Air traffic controllers utilize GPS and radar technology to keep track of the multitude of airplanes in our skies at any given moment, and use this information gathered from surveillance in order to produce an orderly and safe travel experience (Urry, 2007; Adey, 2010). Likewise, surveillance in the form of body scans, security officers, cameras and the like are used in order to produce orderly behavior of those individuals who are moving through the air travel system (Urry, 2010; Mattelart, 2010). Another area in which productive power is related to surveillance is in the classroom. Foucault did extend the concept of the panopticon into the educational sector, with descriptions of classrooms in which students are isolated and only the teacher can see

everyone, thus producing the educational experience (1977). However, Magnus Hornqvist contends, in his book *Risk, Power and the State*, that in some educational settings, such as those which exist in the corrections system, the focus of observation and productive power is not on the student, but on the teacher, with cameras aimed at him/her in order to ensure the integrity of the educational program (2011, p. 90). In effect, placing teachers under the lens has the effect of producing behaviors more in line with institutional policies and procedures.

Moving beyond these structurally based forms of surveillance, we also find surveillance in interpersonal uses not couched in bureaucratic structures. Such things as social networking sites, cellular phones, webcams, or Google Earth, allow anyone who has access to observe a wide variety of people places and things (Gilliom and Monahan, 2013). For instance, if you want to know what your friends are doing, you might search through their social media activities in order to gain knowledge about their behaviors. Bringing it back to Foucault, we might also find that those who are “posting” their behaviors on these platforms are under the impression that anyone can see them, and therefore may produce certain behaviors that are more in line with some cultural ideology, based on peer expectations, etc. instead of some central authority figure or institution.

Power and the Spread of Surveillance

As we have seen thus far, surveillance practices and arrangements can constitute both repressive (power over) and productive (power to) forms of power, in both structural bases and through individual human agency. However, like many concepts which are the focus of sociological inquiry, power is subject to change over time and in conjunction with other social changes. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault details the change from older repressive practices, with graphic descriptions of torture, hangings and other public displays of punishment (1977). While surveillance was in play with these forms and exhibitions of repressive power, it was very much dependent upon the ability of those in positions of power to directly observe, or have observed for them, the behaviors of people (Foucault, 1977). This obviously has its limits, in that to hide one’s behaviors from this gaze would seem to be rather easy. As such, Foucault holds that the public spectacle of punishment, torture, etc. was necessary to get the point across to a population, and thus influence/prevent future sanctioned behaviors (1977). Over time, Foucault shows that surveillance became more refined, with things like the census of populations, and citizen registrations, allowing for more effective forms of surveillance and governing practices, which he demonstrates with a discussion of citizen surveillance and control during plague outbreaks (1977).

Through these changes in surveillance, we can also see a change in the forms of power which are practiced. The examination of the prison, and the panopticon in particular, suggests that power shifted away from repression and towards productive ends, with the emphasis on discipline and influencing people to modify their own behavior (Foucault, 1977). However, Foucault’s examination of the panopticon does, in the modern day, appear to be a bit dated, perhaps due to the fact that it was written in the 1970s, and examined practices which took place many years before that. And so we must ask ourselves how the balance between repressive and productive power has been affected by the huge growth and intensification of surveillance in recent history.

Surveillance technologies, use of these technologies, and the implementation of surveillance practices into institutions and individual lives, have grown so much in the past several decades, that some have started to use the term “surveillance society” to describe our modern era. In the surveillance society, “virtually all significant social, institutional, or business activities...now involve systematic monitoring, gathering, and analysis of information in order to make decisions, minimize risk, sort populations, and exercise power” (Gilliom and Monahan, 2013, p. 2). In other words, modern society is characterized by the

collection of information from nearly every aspect of life, and the use of this information to some end. For instance, every time you swipe your credit card (or punch in the numbers online) to make a purchase, information is logged regarding the amount and type of transaction which is made (Gilliom and Monahan, 2013). Likewise, our interactions in the digital world, the searches that we carry out on Google, the pictures that we post, the comments that we leave, and most everything else, is logged by those who host the services (Gilliom and Monahan, 2013).

The use of this information which is collected ranges from predicting future sales or searches, which we might believe would make the consumer experience better (and thus influence us to spend more...), to data mining by governments, universities, or other businesses who might use this information to gain insight into the population, such as who is most likely a terrorist, or to whom an advertisement for baby products should be sent (Gilliom and Monahan, 2013). But it is not just in the digital realm that surveillance has been intensified. In the security sector, such as police, border patrol or military agencies, there has been a pronounced expansion of surveillance efforts and technologies. For instance, as of 2006 in the United Kingdom there were 4.2 million Closed Circuit TV (CCTV) cameras, or one for every 14 citizens, which are used for crime prevention and national security purposes (Gilliom and Monahan, 2013). Likewise, border patrol and local law enforcement agencies are increasingly adopting the use of military style aerial drones (some equipped with thermal imaging cameras) for observation of movements across national borders and pursuit of criminals in cities around the U.S. (Mesenbrink, 2001; Stone, 2014). When these forms of surveillance are taken along with the increased possibilities for interpersonal surveillance, with social media and other digital technologies as discussed above, it does indeed seem that surveillance is everywhere in our lives. If, along with a shift to what we might consider today to be rather rudimentary modes of surveillance there was a large transformation from repressive to productive forms of power, it would seem that this modern day expansion and refinement of surveillance might also have some impact on this balance of power.

The historical shift seems to indicate that with more surveillance we can expect to see power as increasingly productive in nature (Hornqvist, 2011, p. 8). However, is this really the case? Looking at the ways in which modern surveillance is used, we see what appears, at least on its face, to be rather repressive forms of power alongside. For instance, when looking at the ways in which border patrol agencies, and other agencies dealing with border mobilities, use surveillance to target, document and otherwise regulate the flow of people across borders (drones, patrols, passports, penalties, deportations, etc.), it would seem that these efforts are not so much concerned with producing legal forms of crossing so much as they are concerned with preventing illegal immigration (Torpey, 2000, pp. 154-155). This may be due to implementing surveillance in response to a risk, or perceived risk, in order to manage this risk and thus avoid some negative effects (Hornqvist, 2011, p. 19). Similarly, the use of surveillance by law enforcement seems to be used to collect information that will help to catch criminals and stop their behaviors, instead of a self-discipline approach to productive power. This reactionary form of surveillance implementation would seem to indicate that the associated forms of power are more repressive in nature, seeking obedience to rules and organized around risk, according to Hornqvist (2011, pp. 153-157).

This is not to say that surveillance does not constitute productive power in the modern surveillance society. For example, the data mining which is engaged in by businesses can be utilized in order to advertise and produce certain consumption behaviors, and as discussed above, surveillance in transportation and educational systems can be aimed towards producing orderly and effective behaviors among participants. In fact, it might be argued that many of these surveillance practices have aspects of both productive and repressive power, as Foucault did, though he focused on (and perhaps over emphasized) the productive aspects of surveillance and power (Hornqvist, 2011). Given the forms of surveillance we have seen thus

far, it would seem that both productive and repressive power are indeed constituted in their use. However, at least in its popular framing, surveillance does seem to be viewed as a rather negative and repressive practice, as can be seen in the public reaction to leaked information about government intelligence and surveillance programs directed at populations around the world. And so, whether or not there has actually been a shift towards more productive forms of power which are constituted by surveillance, it appears that repressive forms of power have potentially made a comeback along with the expanse and intensification of the surveillance society.

Surveillance, Power and Resistance

Given that surveillance is deeply intertwined with power, and that it is potentially more repressive, and is viewed as such either way, in the modern day, it might not be that surprising that not everyone in a surveillance society is content with these power relations and surveillance practices. And in the face of the massive scale of the surveillance society, it might seem a daunting task to oppose these regimes of surveillance and power in any way. However, along with constituting different forms of power, surveillance also offers possibilities for challenging and resisting existing power. Indeed, we must avoid looking at power relations and coming to a conclusion that a state of powerlessness results from repressive power, and instead we must look for ways in which those who power is used “over,” or who are the focus of productive forces, might themselves have power with which to resist this domination, and that resistance is in and of itself a form of power (Lukes, 2005, pp. 68-69).

Despite the extent of surveillance mechanisms, there are many ways in which people are able to resist having their behaviors and other personal information collected and analyzed. For instance, when individuals going to a drug test swap out clean urine for their own, when shoppers with rewards cards get together and swap/duplicate them in order to confuse predictive data mining, or when fake ID cards or passports are used to gain access to various locales, these are all acts of resistance against surveillance systems themselves (Gilliom and Monahan, 2013). An interesting example of this type of surveillance resistance is found in the city of Chicago, which in recent years has been expanding its use of CCTV cameras and facial recognition software in order to detect criminals and curb high levels of violence (Katz, 2014). However, some residents were not comfortable with this form of surveillance, especially the facial recognition systems, and decided to push back. Leo Selvaggio, a college student in Chicago, has developed a mask of his face, which can be downloaded, printed, and worn by anyone (a simple paper cut out), as well as a more sophisticated rubber mask for purchase, which can allow an entire crowd of people to effectively change their identities while out in public (Katz, 2014). Not only are the identities of individuals changed in their detection by the facial recognition systems, but ultimately it is Selvaggio’s face that is being detected and registered, which if it were to be widespread could ultimately mitigate the effectiveness of this surveillance system (Katz, 2014). Similarly, there are companies marketing merchandise such as RFID blocking wallets, or the “anti-drone hoodie,” which masks an individual’s heat signature from thermal imaging (Kooser, 2013). And so, it does appear that there are manifold ways in which surveillance, and its associated power can be resisted. However, surveillance itself can be used to “turn the tables” on these power and surveillance relations.

During the recent protests in Ferguson Missouri, and in response to the events which sparked them (and other protests around the country), there have been several notable uses of surveillance practices to challenge existing power structures and practices. One of the most notable developments, has been the expansion of the police “body camera,” which shifts the focus of surveillance from the criminal suspect to the police officer, and thus may help to

prevent excessive use of force and produce behaviors which are more in line with the “protect and serve” motto of the police force (White, 2014). Another way that surveillance has been used in an attempt to produce certain behaviors in the power relations between police officers and citizens, is the live streaming of protests over the Internet. During the Ferguson protests, several groups set up live streaming channels which could be accessed by anyone around the world with an Internet connection, in an attempt to bring transparency to the actions of law enforcement personnel in their confrontations with protestors (Sydell, 2014). During the high point of the protests, nearly 2 million people around the world were watching as events unfolded every night (Sydell, 2014). In these cases, the use of surveillance technologies by those who are normally the targets of such practices turns the focus of larger numbers of people onto those who normally do the observing, and thus challenges and potentially threatens the existing power relations.

This might also pose a potential problem for these acts of resistance, in that those acts which challenge existing power relations might be opposed, and acted against, by those who hold the power. For example, if a population is disciplined into an ideology which conforms to the benefit of those with power, it might be that there is not much motivation to actually oppose what are seen as negative practices which come from those with power (like police use of force). If we draw from the work of Mills (1956), we might look to the concept of the mass society, and the possibility that the population at large might be perfectly content (even in the face of these inequalities of power and surveillance practices) to partake in, and feel good about, banal forms of surveillance, like finding out what a friend ate for lunch via a picture posted to Facebook. And so, while these practices of resistance seem to be promising and potentially effective, it is possible that there will be challenges along the lines of repressive and productive forms of power that face those who partake in them.

Understanding Inequality

This relationship between power, knowledge and surveillance, inspired by Foucault, is not just an interesting theoretical device in the examination of power, it can also be used in order to shed light on other issues of sociological importance. One such issue, which flows out of this discussion of power, is inequality. And for our purposes here, we will attempt to shed new light on a dimension of inequality: welfare and poverty in the United States. Welfare, and other forms of public assistance, are of great interest to sociological and political understandings of modern society. As of 2014, some 45 million Americans (14.5% of the population) are living below the poverty line (Gongloff, 2014), and with the number of those near the poverty line ballooning the number of people who may be in need of assistance, it is no surprise that there is an increasing focus on the American welfare system. Of sociological importance, Piven and Cloward (1993) suggest that welfare, which covers a variety of programs that give aid to those in need (from direct cash or food aid to things like medical coverage and works programs), has historically been a source of economic and behavioral regulation. In times of economic trouble, welfare programs are increased so as to quell the potential of unrest among the disenfranchised in society, and are then scaled back when economic conditions are more favorable in order to maintain the labor market (Piven and Cloward, 1993). In this process, the welfare system is very much a form of behavior modification, in that it threatens those who may be temporarily receiving benefits by treating them, and others in the same situation, poorly, so that they are more likely to rejoin society in a timely fashion (Piven and Cloward, 1993). While this appears to be a decent understanding of this important societal institution, this conception of welfare in the U.S. can be further enlightened by an application of the relationship between power, knowledge and surveillance in several ways.

First, we must look at the role that surveillance plays in the welfare system. Many welfare programs and “benefits” are administered by way of means-testing. Basically, what this entails is the meeting of certain criteria before the benefits are distributed to individuals (Piven and Cloward, 1993). This can involve myriad criteria, such as income levels (providing assistance to those who make \$10,125 per year, but not those who make just a few dollars more, etc.), actively seeking employment, and mandatory drug tests. These means-tests not only serve as qualifications and potential degradation ceremonies for those who are seeking welfare, but also are a point of surveillance and information gathering, providing knowledge of the individual to those systems which seek to influence them in some way. This process of means-testing thus serves as a form of power, with a gaze from an authority fixed on the personal details of one’s life having the potential of producing self-examination and potentially even disciplining the behaviors of those who seek these benefits.

Another way that surveillance plays into the welfare system, especially in the modern day, involves the monitoring of the behaviors of those who are receiving benefits. For instance, in the past, direct aid, such as giving cash or food benefits directly to those in need (Piven and Cloward, 1993), was not something which could be easily observed past the point of delivery. However, with the advent of things like food stamps, which were exchanged for goods, or the modern day incarnations like the “Bridge Card” in Michigan, generate a more traceable set of information along with their use. Whether or not the data which is generated by things like Bridge Card use are actually systematically tracked might not be important, as from the panopticon we see that if an individual thinks they are being observed the actual exercise of this power need not take place (Foucault, 1977). In other words, when on welfare you may get the feeling that you are being watched, and that any deviation in behavior could result in loss of benefits, so you conform your behavior to the state issued norm and thus no one ever has to actually engage in observing your behavior in order to keep it in line.

The use of surveillance in welfare programs appears then, to constitute both repressive and productive power. If observations, for instance of food stamp purchases, are utilized in order to punish or penalize those who are receiving benefit, this would seem to fall more along the lines of repressive power. Though there is also an aspect of productive power here as well, in that the idea of being observed might help to produce behaviors more in line with what is expected by the welfare authorities. However, the tone behind the surveillance, and the public response towards those on welfare, appears to indicate that we are more interested in preventing “abuse” from those like the stereotypical welfare mother, by way of punishment, as opposed to producing behaviors or even reintegrating those on welfare back into the mainstream economic and social systems in a more productive fashion (Piven and Cloward, 1993). This shift towards a more repressive and punitive approach to welfare also plays into other areas of inequality, such as crime and deviance. For instance, some researchers hold that we have shifted away from helping the poor with benefits, to using the criminal justice system in order to manage this problem population (Reiman, 1998; Wacquant, 2009); in other words, prisons are the new poor houses. This highly repressive treatment of those who are at lower socioeconomic levels of society, and the focus of legal mechanisms of surveillance (welfare, law enforcement, etc.) on this population, has the potential to produce a certain societal “truth,” which can then further shape and cement the discourse of those on welfare and those in poverty as being “deviant” (Foucault, 2002). And therefore, from our Foucauldian approach to looking at welfare, we see that the mainstream ideology/knowledge of the welfare system, and its basis in surveillance, has the potential to produce and reproduce power relations which disadvantage a specific population in society.

And so we see that an approach to power and inequality that incorporates the concepts of knowledge and surveillance, has the ability to provide a unique insight into our understanding of these concepts, as well as other aspects of the social world. If we go back to the beginning of our discussion in this paper, the unique perspective on power and inequality which is

offered by this approach can spread beyond just the theories and research of Foucault. And moving beyond a single approach is an important point in the exploration of a concept, like power, that elicits great divisions and contentions within the field of sociology.

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