

**Total institutions / disciplinary institutions  
Presence, Surveillance and Panopticism,  
with Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault**

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**Résumé:** *Mon étude propose une approche comparative sur l'idée de la présence dans l'analyse des institutions «totales», respectivement institutions disciplinaires chez Erving Goffman et Michel Foucault. A partir des deux concepts à peu près synonymes (l'influence de Goffman et de Foucault étant moins reconnue et confirmée), en fait, je vais analyser brièvement, dans la description, théorisation et discussion sur ces petites sociétés fermées de Goffman, la présence des salariés (concierges, gardiens, docteurs, fonctionnaires, officiers, etc.) dans la vie de ceux qui sont institutionnalisés, l'idée de l'exposition totale et le concept supplémentaire de «contamination» (dortoirs collectifs, toilettes sans portes), la présence et l'intervention du personnel salarié dans la vie privée des institutionnalisés, ainsi que d'autres aspects multiformes qui impliquent l'idée de présence (effective) dans la vie de ceux qui sont internés ou barrés.*

*En soulignant les similarités théoriques entre les institutions totales du type Goffman et les institutions disciplinaires du type Foucault, je vais insister, dans la seconde partie de l'étude, sur la présence de l'observateur anonyme, représentant le pouvoir, dans la vie et surtout dans la conscience des hommes, à travers des mécanismes panoptiques qui opèrent dans les sociétés les plus ouvertes (par exemple, dans le système éducationnel). En particulier, je partirai des règles extra-régulières ou même outrageuses des mondes fermés (Goffman), ainsi que du modèle (historique) de la surveillance permanente et la registration de la population dans la cité médiévale ravagée par la peste (Foucault), et j'arriverai à la théorie du pouvoir comme une présence insidieuse (Foucault), à travers la diagramme idéale des mécanismes panoptiques (et leur subséquent «effet du viseur», selon Derrida).*

*Finalement, je vais rappeler le phénomène de la «conversion» (Goffman) ou le «cas Vidocq» (Foucault), représentant le stage ultime de la présence de l'Autrui/du Pouvoir dans la conscience individuelle: assimilation de la présence «matérielle» du Pouvoir et de ses demandes, identification avec les agresseurs, le détour de toutes les illégalités dans des formes coercitives en attendant le Pouvoir lui-même.*

**Keywords:** *total institutions, disciplinary institutions, presence, contamination, panopticism, power*

This paper proposes a comparative approach to the idea of presence in the analysis of “total institutions” with E. Goffman and, respectively, “disciplinary institutions” with M. Foucault, focusing on the key-concepts and theories organized around these approximately synonymous concepts. Incidentally, Goffman’s influence on Michel Foucault has been less acknowledged,

since – to my knowledge – the French philosopher did not ever mention the Canadian sociologist's name and no scientific bio-bibliographical account of Foucault's works did trace any *admitted* influence of Goffman on Foucault. Yet, Camille Paglia, American social critic and feminist, wrote a fierce pamphlet<sup>1</sup> on Foucault and claimed that much of Foucault's innovative ideas were simply “borrowed” from “familiar sources”, among which Goffman was a positive name. I would not like to arbitrate this issue, especially since I have great respect for both, but only to investigate two apparently similar phenomena theorized by Goffman and Foucault, and also to draft a possible *phenomenology of presence* in their corroborated works. This paper benefits from the time I spent on Foucault's and Goffman's work for a PhD interested in quite other theories, but the research I did finally gave me a bird's eye view over the concept of *presence*, as well, as present in their works. That is why I'll vote for theoretical coherence and logical demonstrations, instead of trying to seize every tiny contradictory aspect to be found in the aforementioned authors. Let us not forget that they have different disciplinary approaches, one coming from sociology (Goffman), the other – as inter-disciplinary as he passes to be – mainly from philosophy and critical theory (Foucault). I would rather call their theoretical approaches as the complementary halves of a unified socio-constructionist theory, generally admitted as such, and look over their ideas just as they gradually grow in subtlety, *from the most empirical facts listed by Goffman to the most general Foucauldian philosophies of the presence*. I do believe that, in spite of any possible “inspirational” moves, the scientific purpose they staked on was a humanistic and moral one, which they served equally well and, last but not least, by using (somehow) dissimilar means.

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Goffman's *Asylums* was brought out in 1961, the same year when Foucault published *History of Madness*, but both writers did some research on their own in the early 50s, when Goffman was preparing his book and Foucault was publishing his first one, *Mental Illness and Psychology* (1954). It is by now when Goffman defines his concept of “total institutions”, which is based on the interdiction, imposed to various institutionalized people, to socially interact with the outside world and to leave the institution at all.

Goffman mostly *describes* these *closed societies* and insists on the *physical presence* of the surveillance personnel in the lives of the institutionalized people. Such employees will include caretakers, wardens, guardians, doctors, visitors, clerks, officers, etc., who bring about the *continual exposure* of the sick or the prisoners. Under specific circumstances, the institution's employees are used to making excuses for their uninterrupted surveillance over the institutionalized, by telling about the irresponsibility of these people to the others or to themselves (in cases of suicide attempts, for instance). This is one particular way in which they state the *importance of their presence* among the mentally ill or the imprisoned.

Secondly, the exposure may be not only continual but also *total*, and Goffman shows in detail this hideous face of exposure, further introducing a derivative concept of *presence*, that of “*contamination*”. This concept is illustrated by such horrible things like huge collective bedrooms and door-free toilets, which imply the idea of absence of any intimacy. Such atypical social forms were to be seen in outrageous epiphenomena of totalitarian regimes (see the Nazi

camps), but also in military barracks, boarding schools, jailhouses, religious institutions, etc., likely to be found also in democratic, open societies. Needless to say that contamination is always meant to be an “impurification”.

Roughly speaking, it is *life in common* that Goffman takes to be the accurate antonym of the *family life*, since the first definitely parts with the second to a much greater extent than *loneliness* itself. Most intimate daily activities of the institutionalized will forever be “witnessed” or “assisted” by other people, from the everlasting intervention of the hired personnel in their intimacy, and up to the discomfort produced by the frictions with their own brethren. Such situations parallel those Sadian fictitious dystopias, where sexuality and other intimate physiological things are deliberately and systemically exposed<sup>2</sup>. As characterized by “deculturation”, deprivation of one’s own social “front”<sup>3</sup> and by “civil death”, *life in the ongoing presence of other people* turns out to be the very nightmare of the individual capitalist society, on which Foucault will further on insist in his works. Goffman most especially highlights the extreme behaviours to be found in such institutions, not sparing at all the institutionalized themselves, who sometimes contribute a great deal to the misery of each other. All the time, the suspected intention is to annihilate or disfigure the human social self, a process in which the very idea of *material presence of the others* particularly plays an important part.

The final stage in the evolution of the institutionalized is given by the so-called “conversion”, when somebody deprived of liberty and civil rights comes to terms with the new situation and adopts its rules. Most often he/she assimilates the Other, *internalizes his presence* and may go up even to self-identification with him. Such self-identification leads either to a sense of genuine solidarity or to a take-over of the oppressor’s immoral standards. There is also a third possibility, most preferred by the institution itself, the *maximal standard model*, which defines the ideal image of the institutionalized, one who will always co-operate with its superiors. The most representative case is that of the bandit Vidocq, as discussed by Foucault, the villain who later put himself or rather was put under the service of the dominant powers, becoming the very chief of Police<sup>4</sup>. This phenomenon will be explained by Foucault as a clever detour of the delinquency to the service of the legitimate power, so that the coerced will be allowed to be legitimately coercive to the others from now on.

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Once arrived here, we should realize that this was the point on which Foucault made a socio-philosophical career. He repeatedly emphasized the part that normalizing power plays in people’s lives, this time in the very conditions of *open societies*. Foucault certainly needed new names for his concepts, so he resorted to that of “*disciplinary institutions*”<sup>5</sup> and referred to quite the same *total* institutions as Goffman’s, additionally including such things as the ones referred to in the following.

Not once has he been called a “thinker of the detention”, and he was not by all means gentler than Goffman in denouncing the abuses over incarcerated people. Madness, delinquency, homosexuality, all forms of abnormality are displayed in his works as *transgressive* ways, with the help of which and threatened by which humans are *patterned* into acceptable forms. But the ruling master is no longer a *substantially present* person, like in the case of the poor indoor

keepers of Goffman's world: we could say that this is the moment when the typical sociological discourse of Goffman turns into Philosophy. Foucault is paradoxically both blunt and allusive, exposing most awful things, yet rarely telling the truth in the face.

On the other side, Goffman never shows himself interested in *why* people behave in certain ways. He just makes an excellent job in mapping them out, establishing a huge database of ingenious and various documents and facts which attest for the large variety of customs and behaviours under institutionalized terms, and sometimes he sketches some soft conceptual networks which fail to propose hard theories or epistemological explanations. As compared to the minimal goal he apparently undertakes, Foucault seems to continue such tasks, in the first place, but also to perform new *philosophical* ones, in the second, tasks which eventually change the terms of speaking. More precisely, Foucault transposes generic Goffmanian interests back to the past, investigating the lost scientific myths that governed people's knowledge on abnormality and social exclusion, and finally disguises these realities in new theories about discourse and power.

Unlike Goffman, he is interested to emphasize another kind of presence, that of the anonymous, even non-material observers, which represent the presence of the Power in the individuals' life, but especially in their conscience, by means of panoptical devices. In the wake of Jeremy Bentham, *surveillance* and *panopticism* are two Foucauldian words that go logically together, providing the perfect premises for a disciplinary, normalized society<sup>6</sup>. Standing or disguised in the very middle of the panoptical machine, the anonymous observer may *not even be there*: actually, he will always be *present*, thanks to its Derridean spectrality, which becomes a *mental* one to Foucault. People will just act as if they were forever watched over, this is the secret Foucault has now discovered. As from the model of the ideal prison house proposed by Bentham and up to the modern configuration of university lecture theatres or even of ordinary classrooms or factories, this is the most imaginative way that Power has found to penetrate people's minds and to shape their personalities.

Foucault wrote a lot about *the presence of Power in people's apparently most innocent desires and drives*. He just claimed that Power is not negative, since it does not necessarily restrict or forbid people's actions, like in Goffman's exposed absurd rules of the institutionalized worlds (and like in many of Foucault's books, as well), but, on another scale, the power is *assertive*, it needs to make itself present in people's minds even when it is not immediately visible. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975), as well as other studies on the classical age or Enlightenment, formulates, in terms of history of mentalities, avatars of the power in different historical periods. For instance, Foucault describes the historical method of supervising the people in the Medieval plagued city, where city officials, guards, sentinels, syndics, or grave diggers used to periodically and persistently check upon the inhabitants in order to find who is contagious, who lives and who died. The modern evolution is certainly one from the visible to the non-visible, from the *explicit, exterior or substantial presence of power* to the *infinite, immaterial, subconscious one*. In this mental internalization of the physical presence of power lies nowadays, according to Foucault, the big secret of who we are.

One last idea should stress a fundamental dissimilarity between Goffman and Foucault. If the latter could see power restrictions and panoptic devices in the very core of liberal states,

Goffman, on the other side, eventually turns out to be the optimistic one. A big conclusion about his total institutions manages to show that free and normal ways of living are still preserved even in most desperate situations<sup>7</sup>.

## WORKS CITED

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