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The rural panopticon

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ABSTRACT

As a contribution to both rural theory and a geography of rural disability, this paper tackles the idea of the 'rural panopticon'. Inspired by empirical research on mental ill-health in the Scottish Highlands, the authors specify certain workings of the rural panopticon, stressing interconnections between visibility, observation, surveillance, chatter and interiorised senses of self-disciplining (particularly for those with fragile mental health). There are suggestions that Bentham regarded his institutional brain-child, the Panopticon, as most logically and properly an urban phenomena, even calling it 'Panopticon Town', but there is a supplementary argument that identifies a rural vision – of a virtuous, self-regulating farming community – present in the margins of his Panopticon thinking. Through the figure of the 'glass palace' in the countryside, emphasising the pervasive watching, judging and censuring of conduct, a further link is made from Bentham's Panopticon to the rural panopticon. The paper explores this link both textually and though the Highlands case study, concluding by examining Foucault's dual attention to both Bentham's Panopticon and a rural colony for delinquent boys, Mettray, as twin exemplars of 'panopticism' in the disciplining of troublesome and troubled populations (those with disabilities included).

1. Introduction

In 1841, the British illustrator A.W.N. Pugin published contrasted 'views' of workhouses 'ancient and modern', one of which (Fig. 1) depicted the possible appearance of a workhouse built according to Sampson Kempthorne's 'Hexagon Plan of a Workhouse', as endorsed by the English Poor Law Commissioners. 'Pugin portrayed the 'modern poorhouse' as a prison-like Panopticon' (Driver, 1993a: 61), the latter forever associated with the English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and his design for a so-called 'ideal prison-house'. As Qing (2008: 143) explains, 'Kempthorne's design revised Bentham's original idea, with the governor's daily presence at the centre of the hub, enhancing surveillance.' Pugin's sketch of this workhouse included rustic surroundings, with trees, fields and a neighbouring parish church all faintly visible, thereby suggesting the presence of a Panopticon-like structure in the countryside. Such an equation of Panopticon[1] and countryside is unusual, however, in that the more natural habitat for institutions envisaged along such lines has been the city or at least built-up urban neighbourhoods. Neither Bentham's own writings nor academic texts discussing his Panopticon foreground the issue of *where* exactly Panopticons might be located, but there are some fragmentary indications that the city is logically and properly where they would be found. Nonetheless, a closer look at Bentham's ideas indicates that aspects of the rural, and specifically idealised ways in which rural social life might be conducted, were significant influences on his underlying grasp of what the Panopticon should be and achieve. Moreover, an argument can be made that a sense of the countryside as an intimately surveilled locale, one full of individuals constantly watching, judging and possibly chattering about each other, did indeed have a bearing on Bentham's Panopticon plan.

Such matters are explored in the sections comprising the first half of this paper, attending to connective sinews between rurality and Bentham's Panopticon that have evaded detection to date in the rural geography/studies literature. The second half of the paper then switches to reporting from a substantive research project concerning the experiences of people with mental health problems living in remote rural areas of Highland Scotland. A key finding from this research has been that such people often feel themselves to be constantly under surveillance from their neighbours, and more broadly by the local rural communities in which they dwell. Potentially positive dimensions to this surveillance are sometimes

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[1] We use 'Panopticon(s)', with an upper-case 'P', to denote Bentham's institutional vision, meaning his ideal plan, further iterations and his attempts to have Panopticon institutions actually built. We use 'panopticon(s)' with a lower-case 'p' to denote instantiations of Foucault's more dispersed 'panopticism', including our own specification of the 'rural panopticon'. We have adjusted a few quotations from other authors/sources to be consistent with this approach to using an upper-case 'P' for Bentham's 'Panopticon'.

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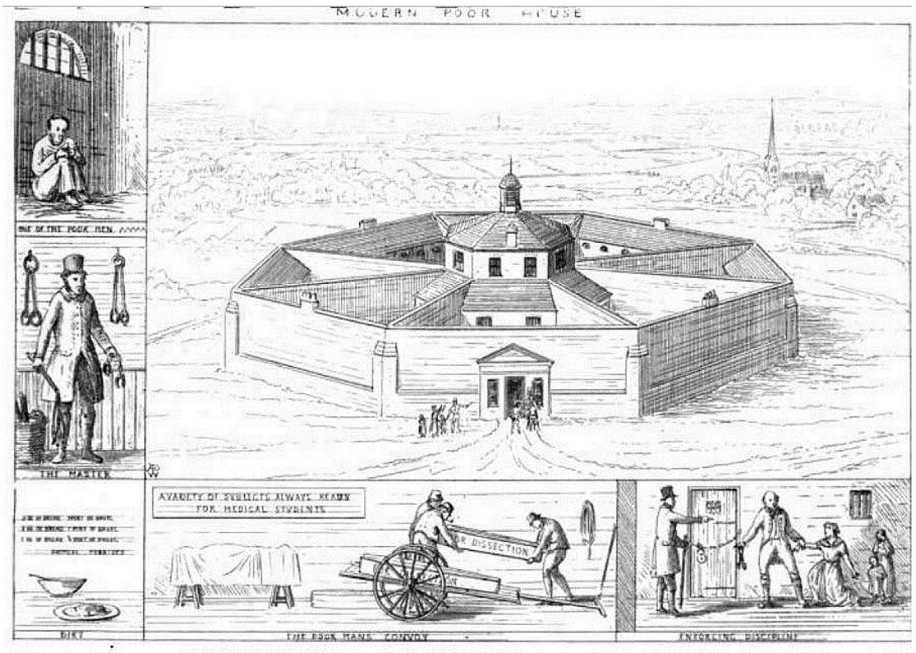

Fig. 1. Upper portion of Pugin's *Contrasted Residences for the Poor* illustration (1836), showing a modern workhouse on Kempthorn's design, about which he was evidently critical. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Contrasted_Residences_for_the_Poor.jpg, accessed 20/08/15

acknowledged, ones reflecting local people taking care of and responsibility for 'their own', but it can evidently also become a potent source of heightened anxiety for the people affected and a negative pressure on their already fragile mental health. Ironically, features of rural social life that Bentham valued – even bringing them into the Panopticon, if in distorted form – were often perceived by our participants 'from below' as problematic; as a drag on more healthy everyday geographies of rural mental disability. It was during this project that the research team began to conceive of a 'rural panopticon', an unexpected presence of, if not Bentham's Panopticon itself, then what Foucault (1977, esp. Chap. 3:3) terms a more dispersed 'panopticism' insinuating itself through a multitude of modern social spaces. The task of the present paper is hence an unusual one, pivoting between an exegetical account of a latent ruralism underpinning the Panopticon, on the one hand, and a sustained inquiry into a (real and imagined) panopticism permeating the lives of rural dwellers with mental disabilities, on the other.

The term 'rural panopticon' had been used before at least twice: by Weller (2004: 53) in her PhD thesis ("many young people face greater surveillance from the 'rural panoptican' [*sic.*]); and by Gerlach et al. (2011: 175) when talking about farmers (as new 'biosubjects') being 'responsibilised … into becoming elements of the surveillance system, ever vigilant against their neighbours, a rural panopticon'. Both of these uses of the term chime with our own, and in the latter part of this paper we gather together field data, chiefly driven by quotes from participants, to convey a picture of the rural panopticon – its watchfulness, gossip and self-discipline – operating in relation to rural mental health. We then close the paper with brief notes on Foucault's claims about Panopticons and panopticism, urban and rural, suggesting how attention to the rural panopticon can inflect agendas of inquiry in both rural and disability geography. It should be noted that our discussion and referencing of studies from a wider field of what might be termed rural disability geography is deliberately light, since this important contextual work is undertaken in the editorial introduction (Pini et al., 2017) to the theme issue containing our paper.

2. Bentham and 'Panopticon Town'

It is assumed that readers will know something about Bentham (1748–1832) and his design, 'The Panopticon', for what he regarded as an ideal prison *or* other reformatory/welfare institution energised by the *positive* ambition of mending the minds, bodies and conducts of disparate 'problem' populations (eg. Bender, 1987; Brunon-Ernst, 2012; Himmelfarb, 1968; Semple, 1992). To quote just one evocation of Bentham's Panopticon from many available in the geographical literature (also Driver, 1985, 1993b; Hannah, 1993, 1997a, 1997b; Philo, 2001a,b):

> [I]ts name derived from the Greek for 'all-seeing eye'. Bentham advocated a new form of design for prisons in which principles of observation were crucial. A central feature of this design was that it would consist of numerous single cells positioned on the radii of a circle, each facing inward towards an inspector's lodge from which it would be possible to see the actions of every inhabitant of every cell (through its iron grille) without [the inspectors ever] being observed themselves. According to Bentham, the threat of continual observation would discourage misbehaviour, with the visibility of inmates maximised through their spatial separation. (Hubbard et al., 2002: 106–107)

First mooted in a letter from Russia of 1787, Bentham insisted that the Panopticon design could be appropriate for any large built institution whose residents 'are meant to be kept under inspection', whether prisons, 'or penitentiary-houses, or houses of correction, or workhouses, or manufactories, or mad-houses, or hospital, or