

## 29. On the Behalf of Equality: Foucault's Concept of Panopticon in *Harrison Bergeron*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article explores Foucault's concept of the "panopticon" and the theory of disciplinary power in Kurt Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*. The dystopian world in this short story includes state control mechanisms that erode individuality and eliminate free thinking. Foucault's theories reveal how the modern state pacifies and shapes individuals through discipline and surveillance. The citizens are forbidden from both physical and mental superiority. For this reason, they have to wear handicaps, which serve as a panopticon. While imposing these handicaps on citizens as a panoptic device, it is framed as both subjectifying and objectifying them. They play an active role in maintaining the power of the state and are objects in their individuality. In the surveillance society (panopticon), individuals' lifestyles must be within the framework of certain norms and must comply with social norms. Thus, this article discusses the true equality with individual differences and what the outcome may cost when individuals are forced to obey social norms. Following Foucault's ideas of the panopticon and disciplinary power, the story illustrates how power isolates those who do not conform to societal standards in prison to maintain surveillance and control over them. It explores how this structure upholds and enforces authority through strict discipline and a surveillance network. It also discusses how the modern state regards individuals who declare their superiority and rebel against the order, such as Harrison, as a threat to its existence and excludes them from society. In this context, it aims to provide a critique of the governing style of modern societies.

**Keywords:** Equality, panopticon, individual differences, Foucault, *Harrison Bergeron*

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**Eřitlik Adına: Harrison Bergeron'da Foucault'nun Panoptikon Kavramı<sup>3</sup>****Öz**

Bu makale, Kurt Vonnegut'un Harrison Bergeron'undaki Foucault'nun "panoptikon" kavramını ve disipline edici iktidar teorisini incelemektedir. Bu kısa öyküdeki distopik dünya, bireysellięi yok eden ve özgür düşünceyi ortadan kaldıran devlet kontrol mekanizmalarını içermektedir. Foucault'nun teorileri, modern devletin disiplin ve gözetim yoluyla bireyleri nasıl pasifleřtirdiğini ve řekillendirdiğini ortaya koyar. Hikayede, vatandaşın hem fiziki hem de mental üstünlüęü yasaktır. Bu nedenle panoptikon görevi gören handikapları takmak zorundadırlar. Bu handikapları panoptik bir araç olarak vatandaşların bilincine empoze ederken onları hem öznel hem de nesnel bir çerçeveye oturtur. Devletin iktidarının sürdürülmesi açısından aktif rol oynarlar ve kendi bireysellikleri için de obje konumundadırlar. Panoptikon aracılıęıyla gözetilen toplumlarda, bireylerin yaşam tarzlarının toplumsal normlara uygun olması gerekmektedir. Bu nedenle bu makale, bireysel farklılıklarla gerçekte eşitlięi ve bireyler sosyal normlara uymaya zorlandığında ortaya çıkan sonucun neye mal olabileceğini tartışmaktadır. Foucault'nun panoptikon ve disipline edici iktidar fikirlerini temel alan hikâye, iktidarın toplumsal standartlara uymayanları gözetim ve kontrol altında tutmak için hapishanede nasıl izole ettiğini açıklar. Bu yapının katı disiplin ve gözetim aęı yoluyla otoriteyi nasıl desteklediğini ve uyguladığını araştırır. Ayrıca modern devletin Harrison gibi kendi üstünlüęünü ilan eden ve düzene baş kaldıran bireyleri nasıl kendi varlıęına tehdit olarak gördüğünü ve onları toplumdan nasıl dışladığını tartışır. Bu bağlamda, bu makale modern toplumların yönetim biçimlerinin bir eleřtirisini sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Eřitlik, panoptikon, bireysel farklılıklar, Foucault, Harrison Bergeron

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## On the Behalf of Equality: Foucault's Concept of Panopticon in *Harrison Bergeron*

Kurt Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron* depicts a future society 120 years from now, where the government controls all thoughts and achieves total equality, but at a cost. In the pursuit of complete equality, individuals gave up their rights, removing competition, impulses, and desires that are necessary for stimulating innovation and creativity. The privilege of independent thought is reserved solely for those in authority, which leads to considerable impacts on 14-year-old Harrison Bergeron, already standing at 7 feet tall and proving to be exceedingly challenging to control. Important themes in the story include envisioning complete equality by sacrificing individuality and the risks of a totalitarian government controlling free thinking. The realism in Vonnegut's depiction of the dystopian world is terrifying. This article analyzes how Vonnegut draws a dystopian universe where individuality is erased and criticizes this system through the protagonist, Harrison's rebellion against the order. In this society where originality and differences are destroyed, it is underlined how important these unique talents are. Bergeron's resistance symbolizes that differences are the wealth of society. In fact, Bergeron's resistance, his escape from the place where he was imprisoned due to his physical and intellectual superiority, involves his escape from the monologic order. Vonnegut focuses on issues such as the suppression of potential and the stereotyping of people by the oppressive system. This article discusses the following questions: What is the essence of true equality? In what ways can society attain equality while still keeping individual differences? It discusses these questions in light of Foucault's theory in the context of the narrative of *Harrison Bergeron*.

In the story, forced equality is applied by the government, yet it ultimately homogenizes and eliminates uniqueness, leading to drastic outcomes. This research examines Foucault's notion of the "panopticon" and analyze how governmental actions limit individual freedoms and multiplicity. This article explores the themes of discipline and surveillance in *Harrison Bergeron*, illustrating these concepts in detail. In this manner, frameworks designed for monitoring and the automatic management of individual behavior will develop. This study explains the impact of the principles applied by the state on the loss of autonomy of individuals under the name of social equality in the story with Foucault's theory of discipline and punishment. The story reflects a totalitarian unitarianism by narrating how the characters are suppressed intellectually and creatively. In light of Foucault's theory, this article questions the limits of this state intervention, which directs individuals to behave according to the standards of equality determined by itself.

Vonnegut portrays a world where equality, as a concept, extends beyond just legal and economic aspects but encompasses all areas of human life. In the story, it is stated that with the addition of articles 211, 212, and 213 to the constitution, all people should be equal. This means that any advantage stemming from superior characteristics over others should be eliminated with obstacles, and those who do not comply with this and break the equality should be punished. "They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way" (Vonnegut, 1968, p.7). All ballerinas, musicians, and painters must wear devices to prevent thinking, making everyone equally intelligent. For example, in order to prevent George from using his superior intelligence as an advantage over others and to prevent equality, he wears a headset that plays distracting sounds at certain frequencies, preventing him from thinking about a topic for a long time and concentrating his thoughts. When he tries to think deeply thanks to the headset, his attention is distracted and he cannot think. Krishnan and Muhammad assert in their article that "equality here is then used as a form of propaganda that dumbs down the general population, who in turn also hide their true talents out of fear of the government"(Krishnan, 2019). Individuals live in fear and falsehood, hiding their true identities. As Harrison Bergeron is incredibly powerful and

intelligent, he carries a load of 47 pounds on his back, using the most intimidating mask, heaviest weights, and cutting-edge thought blocker created by the government. Stronger people like Bergeron carry more so that equality can be maintained. In this context, the criticism of how the interventionist policy of the state, which comes to the fore in this story, especially through Harrison, operates in modern societies, deepens with Foucault's concept of the panopticon. In Harrison's dystopia, where this panoptic system exists, the state constantly monitors society in the name of equality. For example, George, Harrison's father, is given a mental handicap because he is gifted. Surveillance is done through these blocking devices; therefore, they function as control and panopticon. Thus, individuals shape their lives depending on this condition. Discipline and punishment practices are effective in every movement of individuals' lives. They cannot risk going beyond this because they are aware of the punishment they will receive as a result of surveillance. As Hazel questions, "If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few." George reminds her that they are not in a position to change it: "Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain" (p.9). George refers to the fact that in this society, where the so-called fair system exists, there is a mechanism that limits the potential of individuals and threatens the possibility of violation. He emphasizes the price he would pay if he were free of burdens, thus expressing that the obligations imposed on individuals form the oppressive order underlying the concept of equality. It never occurs to anyone to oppose this mechanism in society, and they do not even question the rules. "The subjects enjoy the lack of anxiety since they are already convinced there are no fundamental structural problems" (Erfan, Monfared & Heravi, 2023). If they do, they are regarded as a threat to the status quo. Superior gifted individuals are accused of disrupting the social order, are labeled as nonconformists, and are punished. Individual differences are considered to be dangerous and assumed as "moral panic" as Becker explains that it "typically focuses on evildoers or supposed evildoers who come to be defined as the enemy of the society" (Becker, 1963). It is argued that even if individuals do not commit a real crime, they are labeled as "evildoers" who create moral panic in society as they do not comply with social norms. In their study, Latiff and Feisal state that "public then buys into the ideology that Harrison is an insane, dangerous, and frightening criminal, and whatever is deemed a threat to the government must also be a threat to the people" (Latiff & Feisal, 2020). It expresses the effect of the state's ideology on the people. This imposed ideology causes Harrison to be declared a criminal in the eyes of the people, even though he has never committed a crime. It shows how the government, in order to protect and maintain its own existence, oppresses those like Harrison who has the potential to shake the control mechanism. Hence, the state holds the power abusing the concepts of freedom and equality, manipulating and instrumentalizing individuals for their interests.

The punitive and surveillance state structure in the story exemplifies Foucault's concept of disciplinary power. According to Foucault, by the end of the 18th century, the punitive power that tortured, and dismembered was replaced by disciplinary power. With the change in the type of power, the body ceased to be a punishable object and turned into an object that was tamed and made passive. The taming is achieved through a series of practices that are applied in institutions such as prisons, asylums, and hospitals. Harrison's story is aligned with this domestication. The state, through the handicap officers, disciplines the society by giving punishment to equalize people. Representing the oppressive authority of the state, they are responsible for controlling the inhibitory devices on individuals. Thus, by exercising control, society keeps its submissive position. They suppress the gifted Harrison by reducing him to the norms, using violence and oppression to achieve equality. The government maintains the order to pacify individuals and eliminate differences. Ultimately, Harrison's escape and rebellion symbolize the conflict between the established system and the individual. The only reason he was sent to prison was his innate differences and superior abilities. His effort to maintain his difference is reflected as a punishment for

him, and even a sense of threat prevails against him in society. He is beyond control and discipline, and due to his resistance, he must be detained and restrained. His existence poses a threat to the state's sustainability, which is why he is blamed for "plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, he is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous" (Vonnegut, 1968, p.10). Foucault explains this situation as the new form of power, discipline, and organizing other modern institutions with the birth of the prison.

Michel Foucault uses the Panopticon as a metaphor for power in his work, *The Birth of Prison*, written in 1975. It stems from an asymmetrical, one-way surveillance system where all cells can be easily seen from the center, but the guards are never visible from any point. In this prison model, there is a long watchtower in the middle of the center and a ring-shaped structure divided into cells surrounding the tower. There are large windows on the part of the tower facing the inner façade of the ring. In this way, the supervisor or guard stationed in the tower will have the opportunity to observe all the prisoners in the cells without being seen. The prisoners in the cell, who do not know whether they are being watched, begin developing their own self-control mechanisms. The structure of this system is the same as the system in the story. Even though they do not know who controls it and how, there is a mechanism whose existence they feel. It becomes active even when they act or even think differently. For example, "George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts" (Vonnegut, 1968, p.8). In this way, the individual controls himself. Foucault thinks that the power uses the panopticon concept as an invaluable power through its unique surveillance mechanisms, to influence the behavior of individuals further, to influence them psychologically, and to increase its power over the individual with this effect. As a matter of fact, the panopticon increases the number of people over whom power is exercised, and it also reduces the number of those who implement this power mechanism. For this reason, the prisoners are more careful about their behavior because of this tower, where they think they are being watched. Even if there is no guard in those towers, the prisoners still think that they are being watched and need to be careful because they do not know who is inside. Thus, the number of enforcers of the government decreases as depicted in the story. State enforcers are integrated with the handicaps, and a Handicap General appears only at the end of the story, in the scene of Harrison's rebellion and escape. Since individuals are aware that they are being watched, the rules imposed by the government are automatically implemented. This reduces work resources, and for some people they are not even needed, for example Hazel. Since She already has a standard intelligence, her equipment is minimal and she fulfills her assigned role without questioning anything. "There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about" (Vonnegut, 1968, p.7). As an example of this systematic manipulation, Hazel gets so used to acting on command that she cannot understand and remember her feelings and thoughts. This shows that the state establishes a panoptic system on individuals through its disciplinary power, alienating them from themselves. Being exposed to constant surveillance, not only mentally but also emotionally, pacifies them.

George no longer even recognizes the existence of the device he is wearing, because it is identified with him and plays the central role in his life. He says: "I don't notice it anymore. It's just a part of me" (p.9). It is the equivalent of individuals' concept of normal, and they have internalized this oppressive regime. None of them are even aware that their individuality has been erased, and they have all become uniform. In this respect, power is not considered as a structure, state, government, institution, or political power. Power should not be understood as a power that belongs to us, but rather as a strategic and complex situation in a particular society (Porter, 1990, p.47). Therefore, power is more than a state, ruler, or king's rules and practices, but rather a network structure, and individuals move within this network. In

this context, modern power operates in a different way from the power that is a form of sovereignty, so it is not considered as a type of power that punishes or imposes allegiance or creates a condition of domination. Rather, it has a policy that prioritizes educating individuals and making efficient use of them. "In the functioning of modern power, individuals who tend to submit and consent in certain ways are not just passive and approving targets of power, they are always agents of power" (Foucault, 1977, p.128). Like obedient individuals, which is also evident from the Harrison Bergeron story. They not only enforce the rules but also play an active role on behalf of the state in maintaining the rules. They ensure the continuity of this system by adapting to restrictions and even warning each other to comply. Individuals' consent, internalization, and continuation of this order ensure that the wheel turns. For instance, even Hazel's hint of breaking the rules causes George to warn her, describing the period of multiplicity as the dark ages: "Then other people'd get away with it-and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't like that, would you?" (Vonnegut, 1968, p.7) Thus, it is not possible for power to function as a structure or institution established outside the individual. It is a type of exercising power in discipline. Foucault (1975) defines the methods that approve the control of the body's operations, allow the body's powers to be constantly subjected, and impose a measure of usefulness/obedience on the body as discipline. At the same time, "discipline is also called a physics, technology and anatomy of power" (Foucault, 1975, p.121). Therefore, discipline is neither explained as an institution, nor as a device, nor as a specific method. Therefore, discipline encompasses various techniques, procedures, tools, levels of application, and goals.

The stereotyping of all the characters in the story and the erosion of their abilities and differences show that they have become a part of this wheel, that is, they have turned into controllable bodies. The devices they carry on their bodies indicate their conformity with the government's acceptable citizen profile. Thus, keeping everyone in line in the society, under the name of equality, by living in harmony, in the same and standard patterns, serves the goal of the state. Disciplinary power has taken over both their minds and bodies, which ensures the sustainability of power. While disciplinary power educates individuals, it places and confines them in places and areas where they can be most useful. The institutions where this closure took place are considered as institutions where discipline operates flawlessly. "Prisons, barracks and schools function as disciplinary machines that collect information about the individual and what they are busy with; what can be done with the individuals, and where to place them" (Foucault, 1977, p.126). In the story, this is the function of the panopticon, which collects information. This system limits the potential of individuals, shapes and positions them exactly as the state wishes. Every action, like Harrison's arrest at the end, is aimed at preserving social order and consolidating the power of the government. When Harrison frees himself, he states: "I am the Emperor!" cried Harrison. "Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" (Vonnegut, 1968, p.12). Thus, Harrison asserts his own superiority by challenging authority. Escaping from prison, participating in a TV program, and dancing after declaring his superiority also show a strong example of resistance. The rules lose all meaning for him now. "Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well"(p.13). However, this resistance is quickly suppressed by the surveillance network, Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General. When she realizes Harrison can't be controlled, she opens fire on him. One of the peak scenes of the story is when George and Hazel witness Harrison's murder on the screen. When George shouted Harrison, his thoughts are blocked immediately "by the sound of an automobile collision in his head" (p.11). Hazel starts to cry momentarily, but then forgets her emotional reaction because of the devices that distract her mind. Her feelings and thoughts are manipulated so much at every moment that even her reaction to the death of her child becomes blurry. When George asks, "You been crying?" Hazel replies, "I forget. Something real sad on television. It's all kind of mixed up in my mind (p.13). The only memories left in

their minds are the gunshot in George's ear and the tear on Hazel's cheek, thus emphasizing once again how the system pacifies individuals and makes them obedient. It constitutes the most extreme example of the uniform and docile body profile that the government wants.

This study examined Vonnegut's text through Foucault's concept of panopticon discussing that modern disciplinary power separates individuals that are not subject to the norm from the society and keeps them under control and surveillance within a certain space. For example, Harrison is kept in prison, isolated from society, and subject to the norms until he frees himself. Foucault suggests that although these institutions have different functions, they are involved in the reproduction of social norms as a pressure and control device as panopticon. In the form of panoptic power, the characters in the story are kept under control and surveillance in institutions of confinement, and norms are imposed on individuals through disciplinary practices such as handicaps. These norms constitute the transfer of disciplinary power that spreads from individuals to society in general. Those who comply with the norm are categorized as "normal" while those who do not comply with the norm are categorized as "abnormal" and dangerous. In this system, "the modern power mechanism aims to directly intervene in daily life by naming individuals in certain patterns, defining their individuality, and forcing the individual to adopt a law of power that he and other individuals are obliged to recognize in him" (Foucault, 1982, p.777). The handicaps, as a symbol of power mechanism, which makes the individual belong to the norm by intervening in the individual's mind and body, use disciplinary techniques such as classification, surveillance, punishment, and control to establish and regulate its functioning. This study, through *Harrison*, examines how individual freedoms destroyed in the name of equality are instrumentalized by the modern state in maintaining its own power through discipline and control practices, through Foucault's concept of panopticon.

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