Foucault on Race and Colonialism

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Foucault had a lot to say about power, but he was curiously circumspect about the ways in which it has operated in the arenas of race and colonialism. His virtual silence on these issues is striking. In fact Foucault's work appears to be so scrupulously eurocentric that you begin to wonder whether there isn't a deliberate strategy involved: consider, after all, the context of the Paris of Sartre, Fanon, Althusser, the traumatic defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the Algerian War of Independence and the National Liberation Movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Foucault's few explicit writings in these areas are sometimes curious: take his comments on the revolution in Iran, where he discusses the Iranian revolution in terms of what he considers to be its expression of 'an absolutely collective will' which he contrasts to the more mediated forms of European revolutions.[1] This distinction is constructed according to very European, indeed Orientalist, categories: the fantasy of Iran as subject of a collective will, as pure being, screens the historical relation of the revolution to its colonial adversaries.

Yet the lasting paradox is that despite the absence of explicit discussions of colonialism, Foucault's work has been a central theoretical reference point for postcolonial analysis. It provided the theoretical basis for what has effectively become the founding

disciplinary text for contemporary postcolonial theory, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).[2] What enabled *Orientalism* to be so outstandingly successful, and establish a whole new field of academic inquiry? The key factor was undoubtedly the way in which the idea of Orientalism as a *discourse* allowed the creation of a general theoretical paradigm through which the cultural forms of colonial and imperial ideologies could be analysed. While Marxist accounts had emphasized the primacy of the economic in the development of colonialism and imperialism, the diversity of economic conditions, the historical and geographical differences between colonies (how to compare, for example, the United States with India?) meant that there was no general schema through which the particularity of the cultural effects of colonialism and imperialism could be analysed.

Foucault's 'discourse' describes the particular kind of language which specialized knowledge has to conform to in order to be regarded as true (for example, medical discourse, the discourse of theoretical nuclear physics, of computers, literary criticism, love...). According to Foucault, discourse always involves a form of violence in the way it imposes its linguistic order on the world: knowledge has to conform to its paradigms in order to be recognized as legitimate. Following Foucault, Said argued that Orientalism was less a body of objective scholarly knowledge than a discursive construction, whose conceptual structure determined the way in which the West understood the East. Though accepted in the West as true, Said's point was that Orientalism was a form of ideological fantasy, with no necessary relation to the actual cultures that it supposedly described and understood: the very Orient was itself an Orientalist fiction. At the same time Orientalism, as Said defines it, was a relationship of power, of cultural domination, the cultural equivalent of the colonialism which it accompanied. As Foucault puts it, 'it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together'.[3]

Said's Foucauldian emphasis on the way in which Orientalism developed as a partisan discursive construction has necessarily come to be balanced by the pursuit of what Orientalism excluded. Interestingly enough, it has been Foucault again who has provided the theoretical model for this 'archaeology of silence'. In terms of the social production of the subject, his early work *Madness and Civilization* (1961) has functioned as a founding study of the way in which European society has determined its forms of exclusion and the differences which limit it. Foucault himself described *Madness and Civilization* as a history of difference, of the expulsion of alterity:

> The history of madness would be the history of the Other—of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcise the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness).[4]

In a similar way, Said's Orientalism constitutes a system of apparent knowledge about the Orient but one in which 'the Other' which makes up that Orient is never allowed, or invited to speak: the Oriental other is rather confined to fantasy. The discursive representation of Orientalism has been balanced by attention to the reality which that representation missed or excluded and has inspired a whole movement dedicated to retrieving the history of the silenced subaltern: both in terms of the objective history of subaltern or dominated, marginalized groups, 'counter-histories', and in terms of the subjective experience of the effects of colonialism and domination. Foucault's own formulation of history as a writing of singularity, where the event as event is only constituted through its repetition in thought as a 'phantasm', was itself clearly designed to facilitate the inscription of histories that had never yet been subjected to such hegemonic reiteration.[5]

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In the wake of *Orientalism*'s widespread influence, many commentators have criticized Said for employing too determining and univocal a notion of discourse. This is largely the result of his reliance on Foucault's initial account in *The Order of Discourse* (1971), which stresses its restrictive and homogenizing qualities.[6] Later critics such as Homi K. Bhabha have emphasized the rather different description of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), where Foucault writes:

> we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.[7]

According to Foucault here, the whole attempt to represent 'other voices' that have been silenced and excluded by discourse represents nothing less than a conceptual error. Just as power and resistance are necessarily imbricated within each other, so discourse also enacts its own effects of destabilization.

> We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.[8]

This more flexible, heterogeneous account of discourse suggests that Foucault himself had became wary of the inclusion/exclusion

dialectic of *Madness and Civilization* that Derrida had challenged.[9] By the time of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault denies the very existence of a dominance/subversion paradigm:

> There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in a field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy.

For Foucault, therefore, power is neither intentional nor fully realized; it is rather 'a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced'.[10] Despite this substantial revision, the earlier binary model continues to overshadow analyses of colonialism.

Whether early or late, so much of Foucault seems to be applicable to the colonial arena—his emphasis on forms of authority and exclusion, for example, or his analysis of the operations of the technologies of power, of the apparatuses of surveillance. Foucault's own concepts have themselves become productive forms of conceptual power and authority. Even his images are extraordinarily suggestive: take, for example, the description with which *Madness and Civilization* begins, the Ship of Fools that carried from port to port its cargo of insane people who had been expelled from their native town. Later drunken boat would become the form of the enforced migration of surplus populations to North America, to Australia, or the wandering ships of Jewish refugees that travelled the Mediterranean when the British authorities in Palestine decided to accede to Palestinian demands for an end to Jewish immigration. Similarly, so many of Foucault's concepts involve suggestive spatial and geographical

metaphors: position, displacement, interstice, site, field, territory, geopolitics—concepts that have been developed by anthropologists such as Johannes Fabian or historians such as John Noyes in his recent book *Colonial Space*.[11] Despite this, Foucault's own domains of reference remain resolutely fixed within the Western world, and effectively within France.[12] This leads Gayatri C. Spivak to comment:

> Sometimes it seems as if the very brilliance of Foucault's analysis of the centuries of European imperialism produces a miniature version of that heterogeneous phenomenon: management of space—but by doctors; development of administrations—but in asylums; considerations of the periphery—but in terms of the insane, prisoners and children. The clinic, the asylum, the prison, the university—all seem to be screen allegories that foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism.[13]

Again and again the paradox of Foucault's work is that his analyses seem particularly appropriate to the colonial arena, and yet colonialism itself does not figure. What would be the psychic imperative impelling such foreclosure? Or was it a more considered strategy?

One clue comes at the end of *The Order of Things*, in the section entitled 'Psychoanalysis and Ethnology', where Foucault considers the development of ethnology at the turn of the nineteenth century. Given that ethnology means 'the science of human races, their characteristics, and their relations to one another', it is here if anywhere that you might expect Foucault to discuss questions of race and colonialism, of the increasing emphasis that was being placed at the close of the eighteenth century on the character of non-European peoples and their imagined intrinsic difference from Europeans.

Foucault, however, no doubt thinking of Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1800) which he translated in 1964, considers ethnology only as a synonym for anthropology, that is the science of man and the comparative analytic study of cultures. In producing a general model of how cultures organize and define themselves, ethnology for Foucault is not about the particular differences of other cultures, but about how such differences conform to an underlying theoretical pattern formulated according to the protocols of European thought. This means that

> ethnology ... avoids the representations that men in any civilization may give of themselves, of their life, of their needs, of the significations laid down in the language; and it sees emerging behind those representations the norms by which men perform the functions of life ... the rules through which they experience and maintain their needs, the systems against the background of which all signification is given to them.[14]

Ethnology corresponds at the social level to psychoanalysis at the individual level; it produces what Foucault calls the 'historical *a priori* of all the sciences of man', that is, that which makes objective knowledge of man possible. The special privilege of ethnology and psychoanalysis is therefore that they are 'sciences of the unconscious'—not because they analyse something that is below consciousness, but rather 'because they are directed towards that which, outside man, makes it possible to know, with a positive knowledge, that which is given to or eludes his consciousness' (378).

Foucault, in fact, ends his *Archaeology of the Human Sciences* by naming ethnology and psychoanalysis as the foundations of the human sciences in general. He argues that ethnology should describe itself in his terms—not as the study of societies without history, but as the study of 'the unconscious processes that

characterize the system of a given culture': a 'pure theory of language ... would provide the ethnology and the psychoanalysis thus conceived with their formal model' (379, 381). Foucault's remarks seem here in effect to involve a programmatic statement for the linguistic structuralism of Lévi-Strauss and Lacan. Despite his frank confession of its dependence on a power relation of European sovereignty, his apparent endorsement of an ethnology which would analyse not the forms of knowledge developed by other societies for themselves but how they conformed to a general theoretical model of how societies function, developed out of Western structural linguistics, seems today startlingly ethnocentric.

Few people have a good word to say about structuralism these days, and students of theory have been taught to dismiss it casually as hopelessly flawed. But the paradoxical argument that in language things can be both the same and different, could be said to have constituted structuralism's basic methodological premise which enabled it to compare unlike things, as Fredric Jameson has argued, through the form of homology.[15] At a theoretical level, structuralism was developed as a part of the post-war process of cultural decolonization, disputing the cultural hierarchy of racialism, and turning the critical ethnography that had been developed for the analysis of non-Western cultures onto the culture of the West itself. This is the practice that Foucault emphasizes in *The Order of Things*. His interest in ethnography turns out to be the way in which it provides a means for producing a critical analysis of European society, a 'counter-science' to take the place of the Marxism which Foucault had by this time rejected: 'In attempting to uncover the deepest strata of Western culture, I am restoring to our silent and apparently immobile soil its rifts, its instability, its flaws...' (xxiv). Instead of making a moral argument against eurocentrism, as we tend to do, Foucault is thus rather concerned to analyse the predicates which

made it possible. Setting aside the question of its morality, it was no mean conceptual feat to organize the entire surface of the globe according to a particular system of knowledge. Foucault himself described his analysis in *The Order of Things* in terms of this incorporation of the other into the same, of the history of the order imposed on things by European culture. *The Order of Things* could be seen as an analysis not of eurocentrism as such, but of its philosophical and conceptual archaeology. Before we can undo eurocentrism, before we can undermine its continuing power, we have to understand how it was done.

At the same time, Foucault himself begins the book by pointing to the relativism of much European understanding in the human sciences—'whence all the chimeras of the new humanisms, all the facile solutions of an "anthropology" understood as a universal reflection on man' (xxiii). In the concluding discussion of ethnology, he begins by pointing to out that its very existence is only possible on the basis

> of an absolutely singular historical event which involves not only our historicity but also that of all men who can constitute the object of an ethnology ...: ethnology has its roots, in fact, in a possibility that properly belongs to the history of our culture, even more to its fundamental relation with the whole of history, and enables it to link itself to other cultures in a mode of pure theory. (376-7)

Ethnology is contingent on the terms according to which Western reason was invented. This highlights the fragility of the project of the human sciences as such and exposes their constitution as knowledge through a form of power:

> There is a certain position of the Western *ratio* that was constituted in its history and provides a foundation for the relation it can have with all other societies... Obviously, this does not mean that the colonizing situation is indispensable to

> ethnology ... but ... ethnology can assume its proper dimensions only within the historical sovereignty—always restrained, but always present—of European thought and the relation that can bring it face to face with all cultures as well as with itself. (377)

Ethnology, Foucault suggests, does not depend on the power relation of colonialism, but it does require 'the historical sovereignty ... of European thought'. He we may recall the implicit racialism of Kant's *Anthropology*, which is predicated on the assumption of an historicized, developmental racial typology. Foucault characteristically emphasizes the historical contingency of reason's claim to universalism, even if he also recognizes its conceptual power. At the same time as emphasizing the impermanence of 'man', Foucault also suggests the way in which his invention has, since the nineteenth century, necessarily brought along his shadow, an 'element of darkness', with it:

> the Other that is not only a brother but a twin, born, not of man, nor in man, but beside him and at the same time, in an identical newness, in an unavoidable duality. This obscure space so readily interpreted as an abyssal region in man's nature, or as a uniquely impregnable fortress in his history, is linked to him in an entirely different way; it is both exterior to him and indispensable to him: in one sense, the shadow cast by man as he emerged in the field of knowledge; in another, the blind stain by which it is possible to know him. (326)

Though this passage seems to be moving towards an analysis of the fabrication of the racial other, the penumbra of racism through which 'man' has been defined never gets a mention.

It was only in his later work that Foucault was to turn to the question of racism as such, in the very different context of his analysis of what he called bio-politics, the regulation of the individuated bodies of the social body through disciplinary techniques. The final, sixth volume of *The History of Sexuality*

was originally to have been entitled 'Populations and Races', and this finale suggests the importance that Foucault attached to racialism within the general field of what he called 'biopower' within his history of sexuality. Biopower has not been among those concepts that have been most widely developed by Foucault's commentators; but then there has been a distinct silence on the question of race in Foucault. It is notable that in *The History of Sexuality* following the chapter on Method in which power is first defined, biopower describes one of the two great regulating techniques of the politics of sex. According to Foucault, its power involves the forms of control carried out in the name of the race, for the welfare of the species, for the survival of the population. Racism, for Foucault, is not a phenomenon in Western society that can be safely compartmentalized as an aberration but constitutes an expansive part of the general production of sexuality. He describes it as operating in two phases: first of all, in the form of eugenics, it is directed towards the survival of class supremacy, and then it is deployed with respect to the control, ordering and supervision of the exploited classes. Foucault's analysis of the dynamics of this double function is both unusual and significant in its emphasis on the links between racism, sexuality and class. He concludes that 'sexuality is originally, historically bourgeois ... in its successive shifts and transpositions, it induces specific class effects'.[16] By inference, the same must be true of racialism.

The key ideological term that held class, sexuality and race together was that of blood. Foucault points to the significance of the way in which blood functions in a traditional society, based on systems of filiation and dynastic alliance, as 'an important element in the mechanisms of power, its manifestations, and its rituals'. In a society of blood, says Foucault,

> power spoke *through* blood: the honour of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with his sword,

> executioners, and tortures; *blood was a reality with a symbolic function*. (147)

This means of caste distinction was appropriated by the bourgeoisie when it laid claim to the vitality of its own body: 'the bourgeoisie's "blood" was its sex' (124). By the twentieth-century, Foucault argues, this society of sanguinity has given way to one of sexuality, where the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to its health, to its progeny, to what causes it to proliferate or degenerate, to the vitality of the social body and the race. Modernity has comprised the substitution of sex for blood, not as a new organizing principle but rather because the new technologies and procedures of power 'were what caused our societies to go from *a symbolics of blood* to *an analytics of sexuality*' (148).

Although this is a late work of Foucault's, a consistent tendency to construct history through the substitution of one epistemic structure by another remains apparent. At the same time, he does not here suggest the precision of an epistemological break but allows for haunting symbolic overlappings in the transition from one regime to another. It is moreover, according to Foucault, these overlappings of blood and sex that culminate in racism:

> Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the thematics of blood was sometimes called on to lend its entire historical weight toward revitalizing the type of political power that was exercised through the devices of sexuality. Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, 'biologizing', statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, and everyday life, received their colour and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race.

Foucault is arguing that the technologies of power that disciplined the body through the dimension of sexuality, were repeated and reinforced through the thematics of blood which, in a racist dimension, meant that the social as well as the individual body became amenable to stringent control.

> Nazism was doubtless the most cunning and the most naive (and the former because of the latter) combination of the fantasies of blood and the paroxysms of a disciplinary power. A eugenic ordering of society, with all that implied in the way of extension and intensification of micro-powers, in the guise of an unrestricted state control, was accompanied by the oneiric exaltation of a superior blood.... (149-50)

For Foucault, the appearance of blood-consciousness in the second-half of the nineteenth century mediates the transition between the societies of sanguinity and of sexuality. It is not clear from his account whether racism was an effect of such mediation or its cause. The analysis is restricted to the ways in which racism, in its eugenicist form, encouraged and enabled the state to intervene and control the body through the techniques developed for the production of sexuality.

What is so effective is that Foucault does not analyse the link between racism and sexuality in terms of the individual desiring subject. Rather he shows how they were always linked at the level of the technology of the discipline. Foucault's dating of the appearance of blood in its most racist penumbra to the mid-nineteenth century is accurate: it is clearly central to Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of Races* of 1853-5, which cleverly fuses the idea of an aristocratic bloodline of an ancient family with the shared blood of the larger language 'family' of the Aryan.[17] Foucault's emphasis on the deployment of the mechanisms of power means that he says little about how racialism succeeded by

strategies that always also carried a 'common sense' popular attraction, their appearance of reasonableness masking a deeper irrationality. So, for example, the appeal of the argument about maintaining racial purity through 'blood' was increased by the popular acceptance in the nineteenth century of the idea of *pangenesis*, that is that 'each part of the body contributed a fraction of itself to the sperm by way of the blood'. In the context of nineteenth-century scientific work on heredity—Galton, Darwin, Spencer—sperm came to be identified with blood. In 1872, in *Our Children*, the American sex expert, Dr Augustus Gardner, argued that sperm incorporated 'the concentrated powers of man's perfected being .... Sperm is the purest extract of blood ... *totus homo semen est'*.[18] Semen becomes the essence of blood and of man, so that controlling the patriarchal dissemination of sperm becomes the literal means of preserving the purity of the blood.

Despite the fact that the volume on 'Populations and Races' was never to appear, it is possible to see that Foucault's account of power is particularly suited to the analysis of racism and racialism. Many commentators have complained about the lack of scope for traditional forms of political resistance in Foucault's theory of power. But in relation to the dynamic alliance of race with blood, his account of power as productive seems singularly appropriate:

> What gives power its hold, what makes it accepted, is quite simply the fact that it does not weigh like a force, which says no, but that it runs through, and produces, things, it induces pleasures, it forms knowledge, it produces discourses; it must be considered as a productive network which runs through the entire social body much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.[19]

Racism and racialism must be one of the best—or the worst—examples of the silent and stealthy operation of this Foucauldian form of power/knowledge.

Notes

1.   Michael Foucault, *Politics Philosophy Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge) 1988, 215.

2.   Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

3.   Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1978) 100.

4.   Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Anonymous (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970) xxiv.

5.   For further discussion of Foucault's theory of history, see my `Foucault's Phantasms' in *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990) 69-87.

6.   Michel Foucault, `The Order of Discourse', trans. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert J.C. Young (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 51-76.

7. Homi K. Bhabha, `Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism', in *The Politics of Theory*, eds Francis Barker *et al* (Colchester: University of Essex, 1983) 199-200; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 100.

8. *Ibid*, 101.

9. Jacques Derrida, `Cogito and the History of Madness', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 31-63. Foucault's reply, appended to the second edition (1972) of his *Histoire de la folie* is translated as `My Body, This Paper, This Fire' in *Oxford Literary Review* 4:1 (1979), 9-28.

10. Foucault, *Op. cit.*, 101-2.

11. Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo 1880-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 78; *Time and The Work of Anthropology. Critical Essays 1971-1991* (Churd: Harwood, 1991) 198; John Noyes, *Colonial Space: Spatiality in the Discourse of German South West Africa 1884-1915* (Chur: Harwood, 1992) 52.

12. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 67.

13. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, `Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988) 291.

14. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 378. Further references will be cited in the text.

15. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) 185-6.

16. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 127. Further references will be cited in the text.

17. For further discussion of Gobineau, see my *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995) 99-116.

18. See G.J. Barker-Benfield, `The Spermatic Economy: A Nineteenth-Century View of Sexuality', in Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1978) 377-8.

19. Michel Foucault, *Power, Truth, Strategy*, eds Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton, (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979) 35-6.

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