

A Foucauldian Explanation of Racism beyond Foucault's

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It is surprising to find Foucault, of all people, placing the state at the center of his discussion of racism. In fact, he claims that to speak of modern racism is to speak of *state* racism, and that all other discussions of racism, i.e., discussions of race in non-state areas, are better suited for studies of the pre-modern era. It is odd to find Foucault place the state at the center of his discussion because in his other works, such as *Discipline and Punishment*, *The Order of Things*, and *Birth of the Clinic*, he makes it clear that power should be analyzed from the bottom up. For Foucault, in these books, it is more important (and interesting) to study the local effects of power rather than at its center, i.e. the state.

What then are we to make of Foucault's state-centered discussion on racism? How does it complement, or contradict, his previous works? The aim of this paper is to answer these questions. My argument is twofold. First, having the state at the center of Foucault's discussion on racism is not as surprising as it might seem. Though, in his previous works, Foucault does not address the state directly, he does make the claim that the state, specifically the modern state, goes further into people's life than we usually think. In other words, it is not so much that Foucault does not discuss the state directly, as that he identifies more local places where the state exercises its power and shows that power can also be generated and applied locally independent of the state.

Second, even given the logic of a state-centered discussion on race, Foucault's discussion of racism is too narrow: he analyzes racism only in terms of techniques of power, rather than looking at it as part of the modern episteme — which he described in detail in *The Order of Things*. Looking at racism within the context of the modern episteme, rather than its relation with the modern techniques of power, gives a better understanding of how and why racism exists in the modern world. Looking at racism in this way will not undermine Foucault's own writings on racism but rather it would complement them, it would, if you will, be a Foucauldian explanation of racism beyond Foucault's.

To begin, then, with Foucault's emphasis on the state, it is first necessary to note that Foucault's discussion of racism is tied to his discussion of biopower (both concepts appear in his last writings: *The History of Sexuality* and lectures of 1979). It is, in fact, Foucault's idea of biopower, rather than racism itself, that is intimately linked to the state. Biopower is the state's power over life, and it is defined as the power which aims to “*foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death.” (HS, 138) It stands in opposition to the old power of the sovereign, who manifested his power by administering *death*, and “exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing.” (HS, 136) According to Foucault, the modern state exercises its power by administering life; it is preoccupied with life itself, rather than death.

Biopower is, however, only one of the “two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed.” Biopower is the pole that focuses on the “species body.” (HS, 139) Biopower looks at society in its entirety as a body, a live organism, that must be kept healthy. The power that controls the “species body” is concerned with such things as births and mortality, life expectancy and longevity — a control which requires *regulatory controls*. The other pole of organization of power over life is the anatomo-politics of the human body, or *disciplines*. This

power is “centered on the body as a machine.” (HS, 139) Foucault describes disciplinary power most explicitly in *Discipline and Punish*. There we find a new set of methods which made “possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility” (D&P, 137) These methods, which “might be called ‘disciplines,’” changed (1) the scale of control — they treated the body individually rather than “*en masse*, ‘wholesale;” (2) the object of control — control over the body itself, rather than over signifiers; and (3) the modality of control — constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its results.

The importance of distinguishing between disciplinary and regulatory (bio-political) power stems from the different ways in which they treat the body. Disciplinary power focuses on the individual body and is concerned with the “disciplinary technology of individual dressage.” (Stoler, 82). Regulatory power, on the other hand, is concerned with the life of the body of the species, it is “globalizing” rather than individualizing. Whereas disciplinary power concerns itself with controlling the individual, regulatory power is the “bio-regulation of the state,” concerned with the internal dangers of society at large. (Stoler, 82)

Though Foucault is careful to distinguish between these two forms of power over life (a distinction which is made explicit in the (untranslated) lectures and *History of Sexuality*), he is actually interested in the way they intersect (rather than in how they diverge). In particular, he finds that sexuality is the “crossroads where that power over, and invested in, individual bodies and populations [converges], in technologies of discipline are regularization.” (Stoler, 83) Sexuality, on the one hand, depends on disciplinary control because there is a need to exercise constant surveillance over the individual body (for example, control over masturbation which is imposed on children in the family and in the school). On the other hand, sexuality entails control over the

behavior of the population at large. In particular, sexuality has to do with procreation which is part of a large biological process that does not concern the body of the individual. In this way, “sexuality is situated exactly in the intersection of the body and the population.” (lectures 260). Sexuality, in other words, implies both regulatory (population) and disciplinary (individualizing) power.

Sexuality is Foucault’s prime example of the intersection of biopower and anatomic-political power. However, Foucault finds that the intersection of the two powers is the essential character of the modern, normalizing society in general. Foucault finds that *the norm*, the form of power of the modern state, has the ability to “be applied both to the body which is to be disciplined as to the population that is to be regularized.” (lectures, 262) For this reason, “The society of normalization is a society where the norm of discipline and the norm of regularization intersect... To say that power in the 19th century... has taken life in charge, is to say that it was able to cover the entire surface that stretched from the organic to the biological, from the body to the population, by a double play of technologies of discipline on the one hand, of technologies of regulation on the other” (Stoler, 84) The normalizing state is an intersection of two powers, disciplinary and regulatory, which are bound together by one common purpose: the control over life.

Seeing the modern state as essentially concerned with the control over life (exercised either individually through discipline or globally through regularization) leaves Foucault with a dilemma: “How is it possible for this political power to kill, to give the order to kill, to expose to death not only its enemies but even its own citizens? How can a power that consists in fostering life, foster death? In a system centered on biopower, how is it possible to exercise the power over death?” (lectures, 263, Stoler 84) It is in response to this dilemma that Foucault begins his discussion on racism.

In the context of power over life, death can only be explained as the limit of power — the moment of death is when power ends. Yet, we know that the modern state has the power to kill. How is this justified? Here Foucault turns to racism as an explanation of the dilemma. Foucault looks at racism as the “fundamental mechanism of power that exercises itself in modern states.” (Stoler, 84) According to Foucault, racism works in the modern state through two functions: Defining a hierarchy of races and establishing a relation between the right to kill and the assurance of life. Racism takes the “biological continuum of the human species” and breaks it up into “distinctions between the races, [establishing] the hierarchy of races, the classification of some races as good and others inferior.” (lectures, 264) By “introducing ruptures in the biological continuum,” racism is then able to fulfill its second function: making death acceptable.

Racism establishes a connection between “my life and the death of others.” (lectures, 264) With racism, the death of others is justified because it allows me to live. It allows for claims such as: “the more inferior species disappear, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the less degenerates there are in the species, the more I — as individual, and as species — will live, be strong and vigorous and able to proliferate.” (lectures 265) What is particular to this relation between myself and others is that it establishes a biological confrontation rather than a political one. Previous to the modern state, the death of enemies was necessary for my survival, now in the modern state, the death of enemies is necessary to make life “more healthy, more pure.” (lectures, 265). Hence, “in the system of biopower death is not a victory over the political adversaries, but rather it is the elimination of the biological danger (and the strengthening of the species, race itself).” (265) Viewing enemies as biological dangers is crucial to Foucault’s argument regarding racism and biopower because it explains the identification of external and *internal* threats to the population.

Racism, for Foucault, is crucial to the modern, normalizing power because it “represents the condition under which it is possible to exercise the right to kill.” (lectures, 265) Racism, he claims, is the only way the modern state can exercise the old “sovereign” right to kill — it replaces the “right” to kill with a biological necessity to kill. The moment the state became based on biopower, racism became “linked to the technology of power ... to a mechanism that permits biopower to exercise itself.” (Stoler, 86, lectures, 268) Racism becomes a tool of the modern state, and this is precisely why Foucault’s discussion of racism is centered on the state. Racism cannot be understood, in the modern context, without the state — the state could not legitimate its necessary right to kill without it. All other racisms, pre-modern or non-state, become irrelevant in this context because they don’t help explain the way the normalizing state replaces the “old sovereign.”

Based on the link that Foucault establishes between racism and the normalizing state, he goes on to explain (to sketch, rather) how one might reinterpret Nazism, colonialism and socialism. All his writings on these topics presuppose racism as a “technology of power.” At this point, Foucault seems to abandon his previous discussion on the way in which disciplinary and regulatory power intersect. Racism is described as the tool of this intersection (of biopower, in general), specifically as a tool to justify death, but not as representative of the intersection itself — as with Foucault’s discussion on sexuality. Foucault described sexuality as an example of the way in which disciplinary and regulatory power can come together, yet he seems to deny the possibility that racism can serve as a similar example. Foucault leaves racism in the realm of death and the right to kill, rather than explain it, as he did sexuality, through the specific forms of discipline and regulation.

The only link that Foucault allows between the nature of sexuality and racism is in his claim that sexuality (like madness or prisons) is “the [expression] of murderous qualities of the

normalizing state, [a subtheme] in a genealogy of racism in which the exclusion and/or elimination of some assures the protection of others.” (Stoler, 85) Here Foucault has in mind the variety of mechanisms racism uses to eliminate, control, or normalize the enemy internal to society. He considers sexuality (and madness) to be one of these mechanisms. However, once again, Foucault is unable to understand racism other than as a technology of power, a justification for death. And everything that is connected to it, or is a “subtheme in a genealogy of racism,” is necessarily linked to the right to kill by the modern state.

Racism can be explained as something more than a technology of power that aims to kill. Because Foucault recognizes racism as a tool of power, one can look at racism as working through what Foucault defined as the two distinct modern forms of power: discipline and regulation. Like sexuality, racism too acts on both the individual body and the social body. It concerns itself both with individualizing according to race, while at the same time it helps define not only who is in and who is out of the social body, but what constitutes a healthy, pure social body. Because racism works on these two levels, individual and species, it is possible to reinterpret Foucault’s writing on racism as an intersection of disciplinary and regulatory powers.

Racism can be counted as a disciplinary power because it aims to control the individual body. Rather than looking at the color of our skin, modern racism is concerned with the biology of our bodies. Race is defined, particularly in its US and Nazi versions, by the genetic composition of the individual. There is a concern with the composition of our blood (a mirror of our ancestry), that is, the proportion of white blood as opposed to non-white blood. This disciplinary control over the biology of the body becomes particularly evident in the “one-drop rule.” Here one drop of black (or at least, non-white) blood serves as evidence that our ancestry is not “purely” white. Whether we look, behave and identify ourselves as white, we are still judged by the blood in our veins. Our

appearance does not matter, our bodies are strictly categorized according to our blood. By focusing on our blood, modern racism moves the control over the body from being external to internal.

The shift from control over the signifiers of the body (i.e., its appearances) to the body itself can also be understood using Foucault's vocabulary of the epistemology of order. The epistemology of order organizes knowledge into strict categories that can be hierarchized and measured. Race fits into this type of epistemology because it creates the "distinction between the races, the hierarchy of the races, the qualification of some races as better and others as inferior." (Lectures, 204) Also, whereas an epistemology of resemblance may categorize the same thing in many different ways, an epistemology of order allows for only one way to categorize an item. Racism fits into an epistemology of order in this sense as well because the category of race is fixed — it categorizes according to ancestry, according to blood, leaving no room for confusion due to appearances. Finally, racism can be seen as an example of an epistemology of order since it is concerned with the internal study of man (his blood composition), rather than his external structure. One can find a parallel between this and Foucault's analysis of botany (or human anatomy) in which the study of plants shifted from a study of their external structure (in the epistemology of resemblance) to a study of their internal character (in the epistemology of order).

Understanding racism as an epistemology of order implies that it is capable of exercising mechanisms of control, disciplinary mechanisms that individualize man. In his discussion on the link between an epistemology of order and disciplinary power, Foucault's finds that by hierarchizing individuals there is "a constant pressure to conform to the same model... so that they may all be like one another." (D&P, 182) In other words, an epistemology of order implies a disciplinary power which aims to normalize the individual. In the case of racism, the norm is "whiteness" and it is this norm that all other non-white races are disciplined to resemble. But the

normalizing power of hierarchization does not only impose homogeneity: at the same time “it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, determine levels.” (D&P, 184) This, again, is found in racism where the ability to measure and easily determine the racial category of each person (through blood composition) individualizes that person. Similar to “biographies of the classroom” in which each student is associated with a unique set of records, so does race allow the “characterization of individual as individual and the order of a given multiplicity.” (D&P, 149)

Racism is a disciplinary power because it both normalizes and individualizes. It disciplines people to conform to a norm (whiteness) while at the same time it gives each person a unique (racial) category which distinguishes him/her from all other individuals. This type of disciplinary power works in a similar way as surveillance. Surveillance, exemplified by Foucault with the panopticon, also has the ability to locate the individual and to uphold her to the norm. In racism, however, there is no panopticon to speak of, but rather, one can consider the census as an example of racial surveillance. The census is, ostensibly, a tool to count and classify the population. However, like the panopticon, it has the following effects: it induces a state of conscious and permanent visibility, it arranges things so that surveillance is permanent in its effects (even if it is discontinuous in its actions), and finally it creates a power relation independent of the person who exercises it. (D&P, 201)

The census necessarily makes an individual aware of the category to which she belongs. The categories of the census are fixed (except in the last census conducted in the US) and by forcing us into one of them (note that whoever does not fit into a given category is an “other”) it controls who we are. The existence of the census, in particular, makes us aware that our racial category is important. We become constantly aware that our racial category is visible (if not to our neighbors, then to the state). Also, like the panopticon, the census is not constant. It is taken every ten years.

However, the knowledge produced by the census has “permanent effects” — we are bound to the racial categories even during the ten years when the census is not actively being recorded. Finally, the census exercises a typical form of surveillance because it is independent from the census-taker. The importance of the census is not “who exercises it” but the power of the census taking itself. It is an economical power.

Racism is also characterized by its spatial organization. This, in fact, is one of the main characteristics of an epistemology of order and disciplinary power. Spatial distribution of items in a table, scale, or catalog is “developed according to the forms of identity, of difference, and of order.” (*Order of Things*, 71) This type of spatial organization tells us what things are, how they differ from other things, and what their place is in the hierarchy (or order of things). The importance of the table, for example, is not only that it changes the way we produce knowledge, but that it is also a form of control. Foucault gives the example of the classroom, set in straight rows, to illustrate the way in which a given spatial arrangement gives the instructor more effective, economic control over his pupils. Spatial distribution, in other words, can also be understood as a mechanism of control, of discipline.

The disciplinary power of spatial distribution can be found in the mechanisms of control of racial segregation. Here I have in mind spatial segregation in daily life, rather than the tabulations of races (as is found in Latin America). Spatial segregation is the distribution of people depending on their race. This may take place in transportation (e.g., in the United States where African-Americans were restricted to the back of the bus), or in the schools, or finally, in neighborhoods. For Foucault the importance of spatial distribution is its relation to power, and by looking into racial (spatial) segregation one can find the same type of power that Foucault is worried about. Not only does racial segregation allow for better control over people (as the teacher had over his

pupils), but it also allows for easier legibility. Depending on where one is placed, one has knowledge about the individual. In the case of the Foucault's classroom, we find that the students in the front are the better students, and similarly in racial segregation, depending on where one lives, sits or rides, one can determine one's race.

Spatial distribution both controls and locates the individual—it forms part of disciplinary power that upholds the norm and contributes to individualization. For racism, segregation works in a similar way. Racial (spatial) distribution exercises the same type of disciplinary power over the individual. However, segregation by race can also be said to affect the society at large, rather than only the individual. Segregation does not only make individuals more legible, it also creates a safer, “purer” society. With people separated by race, the fear of contamination of one superior race by an inferior one is avoided. Precisely because Foucault argues that racism is linked to the effort of making life “more healthy, more pure,” one must consider racial segregation to be part of this effort (lectures, 265). By considering segregation to be part of an effort to secure the health of the social body, racism becomes linked to regulatory power. Until now I have described the ways in which racism works as a disciplinary power. It creates the norms, the rank-ordering, the individualization characteristic of disciplinary power, as described by Foucault. However, racism works also as a regulatory power, whose focus is the social body (rather than the individual one), and like sexuality, racism is located precisely in the intersection of these two powers.

Racism is a form of regulatory power because it aims to control the social body. Foucault argues that the control over the social body is linked to using race as the ultimate justification for death in modern, normalizing society. He argues that racism “establishes a *positive* relation between the right to kill and the assurance of life.” (Stoler 84) Though in his writing Foucault focuses primarily on the way in which racism becomes “the condition that makes it acceptable to

kill,” this acceptance would not be possible if racism did not claim to secure the health of the population. It is only because of the biologization of the state, that is, the shift from a concern with political enemies to a concern with “the elimination of biological danger,” that racism can work as a tool to kill. (lectures, 265)

Foucault begins his discussion on racism by defining its functions: to “fragment, introduce ruptures in the biological *continuum* that biopower aims to obtain.” (lectures, 54) The fragments of the biological continuum are the races, and it is only by breaking up society into races, that biopower can control the social body. Or, in other words, in order to assure life — which is at the heart of biopower — it is necessary to divide the social body into distinct races. By doing so, each race is seen as either nourishing or polluting the social body. With race, racism redefines the concept of “enemies.” The enemies of society that are to be suppressed are “not political adversaries, but they are dangerous, externally or internally, in relation with the population and for the population.” (lectures, 265) Racism makes enemies a biological concern for the social body rather than a political one.

Because racism is connected to the assurance of the biological well-being of the social body, it can be interpreted as a form of regulatory power. Racism functions not only as the modern tool for death, nor is it only a form of disciplinary power; it is also a way in which the modern state “presides over the processes of birth, death, production and illness” — it is “directed toward the population”. (Stoler, 82. lectures, 262) The split of the biological continuum means more than the ability to eliminate the “unpure” and “degenerate.” The division of society into races reorients social concerns into biological concerns. For instance, in the United States, racial segregation was often associated with biological concerns of cleanliness — public bathrooms and water fountains were strictly divided. Likewise, racial segregation in public transportation, schools and churches

were meant to regulate the movement of races, so that society could avoid the mixture (the antithesis of “purity”) of races.

The conversion of political and social concerns into biological ones is particularly evident in restrictions on inter-racial sexual relations. In the United States, sexual relations between a white man and a black woman were tacitly permitted, whereas sexual relations between a black man and white woman were strictly prohibited. These uneven restrictions on inter-racial sexual relations were not only due to historical reasons (i.e., the white man having political and sexual control over black women), but also due to biological concerns intrinsic to racism. The sexual relation of a white man with a black woman was tacitly permitted because it did not present a danger to the social body. The off-spring of this sexual relation would be entirely co-opted into the black community (as opposed to Brazil and Mexico, in the United States there was no separate social place for mulattos), therefore keeping the separation, “purity,” of society intact. It was not just a matter of the power of the white man (doubly powerful because of his race and gender), but also a concern with the health of the social body.

The strict prohibition of sexual relations between a black man and a white woman is also connected with this concern for the social body. However, in this case the offspring of the sexual relations represents a pollution of the purity of the white race. A mixed child born within the white community (as opposed to a mixed child born within the black community) signifies the blend of one race with the other. This blending undoes the premise of racism: it undoes “ruptures” in the biological continuum. Or, rather, it sustains the continuum, rather than “fragment” it. In so doing, there can no longer be a control over the health of the population because the separation of the social body into races allows for the definition of some as “inferior” or “upure.” Only by having such definitions can there be an identification of potential dangers to the “life” of the social body.

Without the separation of races there are no longer grounds for “the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or of the degenerate or of the abnormal)” in order to make life “more healthy, more pure.” (lectures, 265)

However, the “fragmentation” of the biological continuum, as Foucault phrases it, does more than identify potential “enemies” to the health of the population. It also creates a *norm*. The norm that appears in racism is the same kind as the one that appears in disciplinary power — though rather than be applied to the body, it is applied to the population at large. Foucault does not write about the norm within racism as such, but he is very clear that the norm is the intersection of disciplinary and regulatory power:

In a more general mode, it can be said that the element that circulates from the disciplinary to the regulatory, that is applied to the body and the population, and that allows the control of disciplinary order in the body and the random actions of a multiplicity, is the *norm*. The norm is what can be applied to both the body that desires discipline, as well as to the population that desires regularization. (lecture, 262)

Since racism is both disciplinary and regulatory, the norm works in racism in a similar way to what Foucault describes above. The norm is applied to the racialized body (in the ways I’ve described above), and it is also applied to the race-divided population. The norm that arises out of the regulatory character of racism aims to regulate the population, that is, it exercises control over it.

The norm in racism comes out of the division of the population into races, and the rank ordering of them. Given a race that is claimed to be superior, all other races are pushed (regulated) to aspire to it. The normalizing effect of racism can be exemplified through the concept of “whitening.” The idea of whitening is the dual proposition that to *be* white is better, and to *become* white is desirable as well. By placing white at the top of all other races, whiteness becomes the

definition of what is “good” (or beautiful or pure). The idea of whitening pushes those on the bottom of the racial scale to move up (to become white), i.e., to behave or appear as white as possible.

But whitening also affects the way we define what is normal. Because whitening pushes those on the bottom to become white, it also becomes that against which one defines oneself. To aspire to be white means that one sees white as the normal. Any deviation from whiteness is not only a descent on the racial scale, but it is also a deviation from what is normal. So, if one cannot become white, if one *is* not white, then one is not only ugly or bad but one is *abnormal*. This is precisely why we find that white is the “unmarked category.” It is the category that needs no justification. People who are in this category do not have to make their whiteness explicit—whiteness is what is normal and only deviation from it, i.e., all other races, have to be pointed out.

Whitening is the normalizing element of racism. It aims to make the population “whiter” — literally and normatively. The effects of whitening are not, however, on the individual body but on the *social* body. The goal of whitening is not necessarily to make the population more homogeneous (which would be a disciplinary concern), but to “guarantee the optimal longevity of the population”. (lectures, 260) Whitening keeps the population healthy because it reinforces the division (and justification for this division) of the population into races. It emphasizes the distinction between what is normal and what is not, between what is dangerous to the population and what is not. And, as I’ve discussed above, it is only by having such distinctions that the potential enemies to the social bodies can be identified, eliminated, and it is therefore guaranteed that the life of the population is “more healthy and more pure” (lectures, 265). Whitening, in short, is part of racism’s function as a regulatory power.

Racism works both as a regulatory and disciplinary power. It sets a norm that controls the behavior of the individual and the population. In other words, racism is linked to the *technology of power*, be it disciplinary or regulatory. Seen in this light, racism is part of the normalizing society — the society which exercises biopower. (lectures, 264) The role of racism in the modern state is not tied to “mentalities, ideologies, to the deceptions of power,” but rather to a mode of power which aims to control the individual and the population in a biological sense. (Stoler, 86) Modern racism does not establish a military or war-like relation (as pre-modern racism does), rather racism is concerned with suppressing “dangers, external and internal, in relation to the population and for the population.” (lectures, 265) And, in order to suppress these dangers to the population itself (*not* to political or military victory), racism is exercised through both disciplinary and regulatory power.

Foucault interprets racism fundamentally as a concern with the biological well-being of the population (whether with its individual members or the population at large). However, racism is always linked to the “imperative of death.” As opposed to madness and sexuality, which are also intersections of regulatory and disciplinary power, racism is the only way for the modern state to retain the old sovereign right to kill (most literally). In other words, racism is not only a mechanism of power but the imperative of death. Only racism makes death admissible in the system of biopower (i.e. the modern state) because racism “does not tend toward the victory over political adversaries, but toward the elimination of biological danger and the reinforcement, directly linked to this elimination of the species itself or of the race.” (Lectures, 265) Racism, in the final analysis, is Foucault’s answer to his original question: “In a political system centered on biopower, how is it possible to exercise the power of death?” (Lectures, 263)

However, by focusing on the relation between racism and the question of death in the modern

state, Foucault often overlooks the way in which racism forms part of the modern episteme. By solely thinking of racism as a tool to exercise death, Foucault glosses over the ways in which racism works as, indeed, a mechanism of power. Racism goes beyond justifying death, it is also a power which controls and normalizes the population. Just as prisons are interesting in Foucault's analysis because they exemplify the exercise of disciplinary power, so is racism interesting because of the way it echoes this modern form of control. What ought to be the central interest in Foucault's investigation of racism is its normalizing effects — whether in its disciplinary or regulatory form. Foucault's brief discussion of racism is interesting not because it answers the question of death in a system that is obsessed with the continuation of life, but rather because it shows how racism fits in Foucault's larger analysis of the modern episteme.

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