

THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF ANTIRACISM

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A recent article by Brady Heiner, “Foucault and the Black Panthers” paints Michel Foucault as a latter day Menocchio whose works must be brought to trial because they threaten to contaminate revolutionary discourse. Foucault does not merely suffer from theoretical delirium but is actually professing heretical beliefs. This article exposes the dogmas of ecclesiastical antiracism.

Antiracism in the 20th century can be summed up by this quote from Franz Fanon: “To break up the colonial world does not mean that after the frontiers have been abolished lines of communications will be set up between the two zones. The destruction of the colonial world is no more and no less than the abolition of one zone, its burial in the depths of the earth or its expulsion from the country.”¹ This is our political comfort blanket: it draws the lines between zones, sets up adversaries that need to be overcome and provides the promissory force of a future that buries the past as it moves. The politics of antiracism have for a long time been defined by the categorical clarity of the adversaries and the ability to name them: *settlers, colonizers, Nazism, apartheid, white supremacy, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, empire, euro-centrism*, etc. If the second half of the 20th century was mostly defined by such clarity, this is hardly the case today. The adversarial

1 Franz Fanon. ([1961] 1990) *The Wretched of the Earth* New York and London: Penguin Books; p 31.



model does not reflect the current manifestations of racism.

Yet, the politics of antiracism, to a large extent, continues to identify itself based on its ability to define adversaries with such clarity. Those enemies are then stripped of their historicity, held in metaphysical awe despite the recalcitrance of contemporary reality in delivering them in such neat packages. If those (white) devils inspire awe, their opposite as the force of good, bearer of salvation, conjure up awe and reverence in equal measure. Such conceptual objects must also be clearly defined: *necessary antagonisms, contradictions, revolution, the revolutionary subject, decolonization, third world liberation*, etc. Obviously, one can never be too careful about possible heresies, contaminations and temptations. And thus the catalog of sins in the Sacrament of Penance: *liberal conceit, humanism and antihumanism* (depending on the denomination – by faith alone or through the sacraments), *monumental reading, death of the subject, poststructuralism, postmodernism, the cultural turn*.

Such conceptual objects as ‘necessary antagonisms’, ‘contradictions’, ‘revolution’, ‘the revolutionary subject’, ‘decolonization’, ‘third world liberation’ must be clearly defined.

By setting its categories of sins, ecclesiastical antiracism must guard against deviations and appropriations that originate from within the Church. The target is not so much the racisms in the domain of the profane (‘the social’ and ‘the political’) but the policing of the borders of the sacred. If revolution is not only next to godliness but godliness itself, clerical power must be mobilized to prevent any contamination. Ecclesiastical antiracism is thus the consecrated power of those with the sacred task of preventing sins from contaminating the hallowed objects of theoretical enterprise. And this consecration is itself obtained through appeals to the objects of metaphysical awe, be they *revolution* or *necessary antagonisms*. As such, the political theology of antiracism in the contemporary moment oscillates between ecclesiastical authority, the adversarial model and the identification and prevention of heresies (perhaps turning critical theories of race into a heresiology).

Within the political theology of antiracism, Michel Foucault has somehow been identified as the heresiarch whose theories threaten the sacred itself. A recent article by Brady Heiner, *Foucault and the Black Panthers*,² paints Foucault as a latter day Menocchio,³ whose works must be brought to trial

2 Brady Thomas Heiner. (2007) ‘Foucault and the Black Panthers’ in *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action* 11:3.

3 Cf. Carlo Guinzburg. ([1976] 1980) *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*

because they threaten to contaminate the revolutionary discourse. Foucault does not merely suffer from theoretical delirium but is actually professing heretical beliefs. Compared to blasphemy or apostasy, heresies arise on the same grounds as the orthodoxy being protected, as errors in the interpretation of the scriptures. The heresiarch and his followers are never outside the established Church, but they seek to corrupt from within. Ecclesiastic antiracism seeks to “expose” and “reveal” these errors to prevent the counter-pastoral power from “appropriating” and usurping the discourse of the true pastor and misleading the flock.

Subsequently, it is not only the evidence itself that is important but also the tone of the evidence. The thesis must then establish the object of metaphysical awe (“Black Power”) from which all the conclusions will be derived. Heiner’s clerical reading of Foucault reflect the political theology of anti-racism; the deployment of ecclesiastical authority to establish the adversarial model and the subsequent cleansing of the object of metaphysical awe from heretical “appropriations.” The political theology of antiracism thus recruits and recuperates its believers in the process, explaining why Heiner’s article is widely cited. Thin evidence matters little so long as one dispels false veneration and reinforces the discourse of the true metaphysics.

Among the many theses that Heiner nails to the door, two interrelated claims is of particular importance for a politico-theological interpretation: 1) Foucault’s genealogical method derives from the Black Panther’s theorization of a counter-history of

(trans. John and Anne Tedeschi Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.



race struggle and politics as war (in relation to state racism.) 2) Black Power theories “magnetize bullets” while “monumental” discussions of Foucault is legitimated by “American and European academies.” According to the clerical reading, such appropriation and subsequent effacement perpetuates the subjugation of black antiracism, black revolutionary thought and ultimately any attempts to change the socio-political conditions that sustain state racism.

Since the heretic makes his departure from within the Church, the Foucauldian conception of power must be shown to have originated from Black Power

itself, or in this case the Black Panther Party (BPP). As such, Heiner must make a distinction between archaeology and genealogy, claiming that Foucault only elaborated the genealogical method after his encounter with the BPP literature. Prior to his encounter with “US-style racism,” through the BPP, Foucault was concerned with “the formation of enunciative modalities, the historical a priori and the history of ideas” (321). Given that methodologically Foucault explicitly rejects ‘history of ideas,’ the task of self-consecration makes light work of this aspect. But not through ignorance, since Heiner proceeds to distinguish his own methodology from that of the ‘history of ideas’ while reclaiming part of it (322). The trial as spectacle is more important than the content.

Heiner’s distinction between archaeology (as academic, history of ideas, non-explicit theorization of power) and genealogy (explicit theorization of power, counter-history, “counter-hegemonic” [sic]) only holds in ecclesiastical antiracism. By default this mode of argumentation denies Foucault’s explicit theorization of power in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* where institutions play a constitutive role in discourse.⁴ And again in *Madness and Civilization*, where he argues that the establishment of madness and the confinement of ‘madmen’ become the conditions of possibility of the society of reason and the reasonableness of Bourgeois society.⁵

4 Michel Foucault. ([1969] 1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith) New York: Pantheon Books.

5 Michel Foucault. ([1961] 2001) *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (trans. Richard Howard) London and New York: Routledge Classics; p 234, 246.

As for the “historical a priori” and “the formation of enunciative modalities,” one must note a recurring theme from *Madness and Civilization*, which Foucault would later elaborate as his enquiries into how “modes of objectification” transform “human beings into subjects.”⁶ That is, Foucault was explicitly concerned with how modes of knowledge (from philology to linguistics to economics to biology) act on acting subjects, to create the conditions of possibilities for subjects to think *of themselves* and *for themselves*. In effect, the much quoted distinction between the double meaning of subjectivation⁷ (‘assujettissement’) as both the formation and the regulation of the subject, is already present in these early works. These themes can also be found in *The Order of Things*, though acknowledging this aspect would militate against the Inquisition’s wish to portray it as a work divorced from the concept of power.⁸

And so to the smoking gun that *proves* that there exists a radical break between archaeology and genealogy. Heiner produces one quote from Foucault from an interview during his trip to the USA where he says that class disparities he witnessed there were a “second revelation” to him as to the starkness of the class struggle. To set up his categorical adversaries, Heiner must discard Foucault’s statement from the same interview where he states that the period of



The Order of Things was a “period of transition” (i.e. not a radical break). And hence demonstrate that the heretic shares the same metaphysical grounds as the sacred: “It was only after he had witnessed evidence of the racially fashioned class warfare transpiring in the USA during that time, and had begun to inform himself about the radical anti-racist struggles being undertaken in the context of that war that Foucault began to theorize power relations in any kind of explicit way” (317).

The rather *ambiguous* quote from Foucault gains categorical clarity in Heiner’s interpretation above because the point is to condemn deviation from orthodoxy, namely that the BPP articulated the truth of racism. Foucault’s experience of the Second World War and the Algerian revolution (in terms of its impact on France), the presence of and response to the preoccupations of dominant intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre (e.g. in the contrast to Sartre’s concept of the “total intellectual”) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty must be ignored. Hence the claim from Heiner (from his reading of *Society must be Defended*) that Foucault relegates the problem of

racism to the past – Nazism and Stalinism – when he could (and should) have taken up the concerns of the BPP. Asks Heiner: “Why, in the College de France, was black power contorted into a European mold and suppressed from speaking?” (343).

Indeed. This rhetorical question is the prelude to Heiner’s 2 Theses. Before we look at the latter, two interrelated questions should be raised about Foucault’s so-called *relegation* (error) – despite the revelation but before the “appropriation” (deadly sin) – of racism to the past of Nazism and Stalinism (in *Society must be Defended*, Foucault is speaking more broadly about Socialism, not just “Stalinist Soviet Union” as Heiner says). On the one hand, and more narrowly, one could see Foucault reacting to the tendency among socialists to reduce racism to a problem of economics, as merely superstructural to class exploitation. As he argues, Socialism has made no “critique of the theme of biopower,” so much so, that racism will continue to persist even under a socialist state or whatever is supposed to replace the state in the socialist telos. Secondly, by refusing the economic reductionism of socialist interpretations of Nazism, Foucault rejects the Trotskyist interpretation of Fascism i.e. the ‘revenge of the petite-bourgeoisie’ thesis espoused by European socialists (even to this day in some quarters). And on a broader level, the 1976 lectures must be seen within Foucault’s larger oeuvre and the discussions on racism started in the previous year’s lectures (*Abnormal*).

Heiner’s discussion could have turned to this genealogy of *the modern*, for example the liberal concepts of progress, privacy, secularization etc., to unearth its relation to racism as Foucault begins in

6 Michel Foucault. (1982) ‘The Subject and Power’ in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 8, No. 4 (Summer 1982): 777-795: 777.

7 cf. Judith Butler. (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

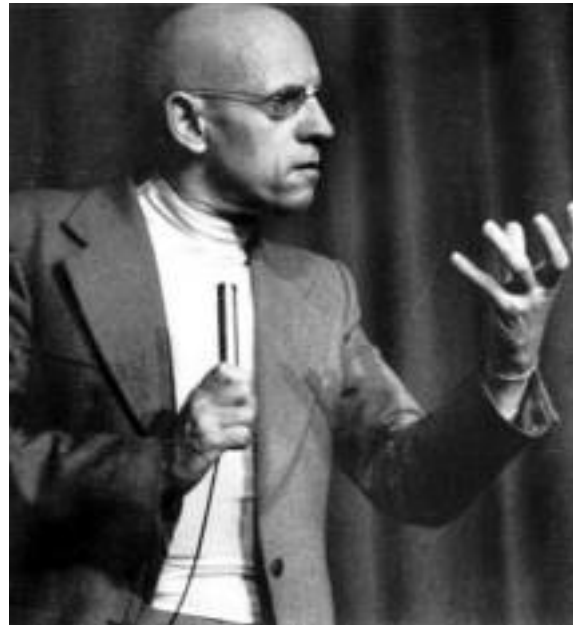
8 Michel Foucault. ([1966] 1994) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* New York: Vintage Books.

Society must be Defended.⁹ The rush to condemn often blinds ecclesiastical readings to the elaboration of the conditions of possibilities for the practice of thinking in modernity with profound lessons for the contemporary moment. How, for example, are forms of racisms being refigured, disavowed, re-elaborated, justified and expressed? What kind of readings of race and modernity do we get from Foucault that might be useful to think with about the current moment?

Unfortunately, such questions are to the political theology of antiracism what lust is to that of St. Augustine – barriers to true conversion. Once discarded, and free from “wallowing in filth and scratching the itching sore of lust,” the professorial philosophers of the revolutionary subject can now separate cities of god from those of men. This theological triage necessarily transforms all (mis)appropriations into errors to protect the true Word from corruption. Deviations are not mere errors that can be rectified, but they actually threaten and destabilize the consecrated Word as polluting agents.

And so, to Heiner’s first thesis, namely that Foucault’s genealogical method derives from the Black Panther’s theorization of a counter-history of race struggle and politics as war (in relation to state racism). While Heiner casts the counter-history of race struggle as revolutionary thought by the BPP, the argument is rather different in Foucault’s lectures. That is, Foucault does not “praise” this counter-history in the literal sense. Rather, he highlights this discourse as a strategy. Beyond this aspect,

⁹ These themes have been taken up by Foucault’s students. See for example Jacques Donzelot. (1984) *L’invention du social: Essai sur le déclin des passions politiques* Paris: Editions du Seuil.



Foucault also says that the ‘counter-history of race struggle’ contains messianic, biblical, and mythical themes (returning leader, new guide/empire etc.) and that it is both a “discourse of bitterness and the most insane hope.”¹⁰ While one might see the themes of the Third Reich here, it is made clear that this discourse is radically different to the discourse of race/racism of the 19th century. In fact, Foucault highlights that the original discourse of the ‘struggle of races’ (races in the plural) serves as a critique of sovereignty in England and France. Meanwhile, the race struggle of the 19th century is in the singular (biological race) that refers to the split between race and class. That is, in the 19th century, the struggle

¹⁰ Michel Foucault. (2003) *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976* New York: Picador; p 57.

of races is recoded as class struggle while biological race becomes tied to the destiny and progress of the nation.

It is precisely this marriage of race and nation that allows the state to intervene into the lives of individuals and collectivities to fulfill the promise of purity, destiny and protection. Hence ‘society must be defended’ as promise, task and imperative of the state. “Counter-history” only serves to indicate how the dialectical struggle of classes can also find overlapping interpretations as a race struggle. What Foucault tries to show is how particular periods of history produce the conditions for struggles between groups to be understood in racial terms. “All is race” as in the Disraelian conception.

That is, Foucault’s conceptualization is radically different and incompatible to what George Jackson (as quoted by Heiner) terms race struggle in the US, in so far as it refers narrowly to a struggle against a racist state. Moreover, it is not power that is conceptualized “through the analytic of war” (321) as Heiner says, but rather politics. Foucault theorizes politics as an agonistic struggle against the consensual emphasis of much political theory (especially in contract theory). But, Foucault is not concerned with elaborating politics as war in the Gramscian sense of a war of position and a counter-hegemonic practice of revolutionary parties. Yet, Heiner sees no reason to elaborate on how he came to understand counter-history as counter-hegemony or more precisely, the role if any, of the concept of hegemony in Foucault’s theoretical apparatus. Or how he mapped the BPP’s “counter-hegemonic” (323) theorization onto subjectivation.¹¹ A broader discussion of the

¹¹ For a discussion of the relationship between Marx

relationship between Foucault's conceptual apparatus and the Marxian notions of contradiction, antagonism, adversaries etc. would also have proved useful especially with regard to Foucault's discussion of his intellectual trajectory in *The Subject and Power*. Again, such questions might derail the Inquisition's desire to establish the heretical appropriation.

In the work of sacralization, the negative cult (in the Durkheimian sense) must ritualistically discard any evidence that might pollute the sacred. Henceforth, Foucault would have turned to Nietzsche only after the Damascene moment in the US: "If Nietzsche features prominently in Foucault's genealogical turn, it is, I argue because the philosophies and struggles of the Black Panthers led Foucault both to Nietzsche and to genealogy as a method of historico-political critique" (314). We might remind the readers that Foucault's dissertation – on Kant's anthropology in 1961 (i.e. before the Fall) – was described by his advisor as "more inspired by Nietzsche than it is by Kant."¹² And if clerical authority had practiced the humility that it preaches, it might find inchoate forms of the genealogical method in *The Order of Things*, especially in the discussions of Cervantes and Sade...

Hence, one can only conclude that addressing such issues would ruin the second thesis, namely

and Foucault, see Etienne Balibar. (2002) 'Three concepts of politics: Emancipation, Transformation, Civility' in *Politics and the Other Scene* London and New York: Verso.

12 Quoted in Roberto Nigro. (2008) 'From Kant's *Anthropology* to the Critique of the Anthropological Question: Foucault's *Introduction* in Context' in Michel Foucault. *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology* Los Angeles, CA: SEMIOTEXT(E).



that black power "magnetizes" bullets. Again, the rhetoric of the question is made to do all the work here: "why is it that the enunciative force of black power is met with social, civil and biological death while that of power-knowledge is subject to canonization in a host of academic disciplines?" (315) While it is a truism that "black power magnetizes bullets," it is hardly *the* truth of racism. The rhetoric of the question can be summarized thus: Given that Foucault subjugates the thought of the Black Panthers, a symptomatic reading of Foucault shows us that this is a larger pattern that is superstructural to the racist social and political conditions prevailing everywhere. Given that such racist conditions rest on the social, civil and biological death of blacks,

anti-racism as race struggle, war and insurrection cannot appear in academic works. Instead, the latter appear as only the legitimate forms possible i.e. disciplinary power, normalization and regulation as a non-revolutionary form.

As such, the desire for pre-lapsarian concepts such as 'necessary antagonisms,' contradictions etc. clouds any serious discussion of contemporary racisms. As I argued above, the political theology of antiracism moves between ecclesiastical authority, an adversarial model of politics, and the identification and prevention of heresies. This triple movement reinforces many essentialist concepts through acts of epistemic purification¹³ (without ignoring the socio-political purifications that it also informs, i.e. 'the fear of small numbers'¹⁴). Thus it sets up 'necessary antagonisms' between antiracism and capitalism or any other identified enemies. While departing from the Marxist conception of race *and* class, it remains Marxian (in denial). It might ask into the conditions of possibility of 'the necessary' but never into how we come to think of certain conditions as necessary (for example, the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth¹⁵), and whether these conditions hold today.

For all political theologies are by definition ahistorical: they must always protect the truth of the Word through positive and negative cults. If artistic

13 Bruno Latour. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern* (trans. Catherine Porter) Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

14 Arjun Appadurai. (2006) *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

15 cf. Michel Foucault. (2010) *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the College de France 1982-1983* (trans. Graham Burchell) London: Palgrave Macmillan.

license is allowed in portraying the Stations of the Cross, the content must not change. The political theology of antiracism is no different. It can only find and assert the eternal ‘modes of production’ of race and racism while ignoring the modality of that production in different phases of history. And the latter is exactly what Foucault tried to approach through his investigations into the production of *the modern* and *modes of modernization*. Just like *the modern* carried forms of death (social and otherwise – what Foucault termed biopolitics), so too does *the postmodern* (an elaboration and a critique can be found in the concept of necropolitics). Foucault’s discussion of biopolitics and race/racism in *Society must be Defended* can be situated within a larger project of unearthing the different projects that tied race, nation and progress into the ‘warm embrace’ (as Foucault called it) of the state.

Seen within this larger context, we might start to investigate how these national narratives and statist guarantees are being fragmented and de-centered, making essentialist assumptions redundant. This makes it all the more difficult to pit adversaries against one another. Simply put, the line between friends and foes are becoming increasingly blurred, where “the enemy is the ally, and the ally is the enemy: enemy mine.”¹⁶ Whether we are speaking about colonialism (in terms of post- or neo-colonialism), imperialism or contemporary racism, the goal is not to pursue an epistemic purification that would yield two groups pitted against each other – power/resistance, domination/revolution, weapons of the

strong/weak, master’s tool, apartheid/anti-apartheid etc. The contemporary moment perhaps makes the tendency of the exorcist to find ‘white devils’ in the social world redundant, but that should not distract critique from attempts to understand the spectrality of whiteness today. Yet, the re-articulation and re-inscription of whiteness matters little to a puritanical ecclesiastical authority hell bent (pun intended) on identifying enemies and consecrating itself with the sacred task of purging heretical deviations. Thus, pressing concerns over the reorganization of *the social* under neoliberal policies (which should make us question again what we mean by *the social* construction of race) simply cannot enter the framework of the political theology of antiracism.

What matters is that, against the ‘white devils’ stands the professorial (and professional) philosopher of revolutionary discourse who refuses, for fear of contamination, to historicize the very concept of revolution. Heresy is thus defined as the denial, on sacred grounds, of the faith (revolution). Once this framework is established it is easy to find transgressions: misappropriations, deviations, denials, “epistemic injustice,” canonization and so on. The political theology of antiracism (if it is not a broader tendency of the left) applies to a number of situations today, whether it is in Israel, the US or international ‘justice movements’ (from reparations to indigenous rights to a dying postcolonialism). If there is to be any antiracist ‘movement’ left, it has to take the historicity of racism into account and rethink the possibility of antiracism.

16 Katherine Hayles. (1999) *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press; p 107, 166.