

**The war against Indigenous Australia/ns:
Foucault, racism and social work education**

Tony Fletcher

Abstract

In a series of lectures at the College de France 1975–1976 entitled ‘Society must be defended’, Michel Foucault made the following observation: ‘sovereignty’s old right – to take life or let live ... came to be complemented by ... the power to “make” live and “let” die’ (2003, p. 241). Foucault connected this disposition with socio-political events and concluded that modern societies, though describing their machinations as being in a state of peace, are internally at war with subjects/bodies produced as belonging to an ‘inferior species’ (Foucault 2003). This paper connects Foucault’s understanding of ‘racism’ with the concept of ‘fields of visibility’ to explore the creation of culturally competent practices among social work students when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Introduction

This paper draws upon a series of lectures performed by Michel Foucault at the College de France in 1976 entitled ‘Society must be defended’ (2003), beginning with a reading of his proposition that ‘peace itself is a coded war’ (p. 51). My aim is to explain Foucault’s concept of racism as a basis for a discursive exploration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s experiences of colonisation since 1788. How might such an exploration inform emerging social work identities and practices when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? Foremost, as a white male engaged in exploring colonisation, I am particularly mindful of challenges arising from the development of Foucault’s discourse on racism developed outside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and that my speaking position is a production of similar connections with privilege, or, in this case specifically, of a ‘colonising’ version of whiteness and masculinity.¹ Clearly, I cannot lay claim to escaping the discursive fabrications of privilege that reconstitute me. I hold myself mindful of speaking to concepts that could impose themselves as limiting and threshold devices across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s lives, or ‘further micro-fascisms’, as Deleuze and Guattari warn in *A thousand plateaus* (2004).

Foucault and racism

The concept of race was invented and implemented as a form of ‘dividing practice’ where the epiphenomena generated are (re)invented and deployed to justify decimations and genocides. Foucault’s identification of the disposition regarding race transforms it as a biological invention into a concept of race which comes into discursive practice when:

There are two groups which although they coexist, have not become mixed because of the dissymmetries, differences, and barriers created by privileges, customs, rights, the distribution of wealth, or the way in which power is exercised. (2003, p. 77)

¹ My body is read as white and male. Thus, me talking about strategic fields in relation to whiteness is doing whiteness and producing a version of whiteness that is potentially equivalent at worst, yet resembles at best, a colonialisng version of whiteness. Though not completely ‘discourse determined’ (Pease 1998), I am made available as recognisable to myself and others through the discourses that mark my body and the discourses that mark the body of the ‘othered’. However, I can also make myself known through the acknowledgements I make concerning the ways I connect with discursivities. My hope is that I will perform a reflective relationship with white privilege that will speak into existence a version of white, heterosexual male that can be seen as a potential ally.

Although Foucault argued that sovereign power and disciplinary practices invoked notions of race when relations of force represented an intention to dominate, such relations acted directly upon or were aimed at individual bodies to secure the sovereign and the sovereign's territory. Foucault's 'studies in governmentality' suggested that, under the investment in the 'best interests' of a population, the 'highest function' of power 'was perhaps no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through ... the power to "make" live and "let" die' (Foucault 2003, pp. 279, 241). He argued that biological models regarding race/races prevalent in the disciplining discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were folded into statist attentions to the 'population' under the population-forming discourses of 'biopower'. Foucault suggested that 'racism' 'is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die' (Foucault 2003, p. 254).

Foucault's identification of racism's 'state disposition' shows how violence is enacted in the name of the nation's population, the public interest. Nation and race become somewhat merged to form a population through the categorical products of 'biopolitics' and the invention of a multiplicity of beings, a 'massified' individual (Foucault 2003, p. 243). The move within biopolitics is to enact this violence in a way that perpetuates the 'common interests' of the population so that practices are not seen as acts of violence or ideologically racist. Discourses deployed to form and express the 'population' produce and manage the thresholds of knowledge of subjects under the principle of contributing to the 'common interests of the population'. This produces an economy of contribution where 'interests' and 'population' are syllogistically produced.² The 'population' in Australia is formed discursively as white, or variations able to add materially to public 'best interests', while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are discursively inferiorised. Foucault asks us to

² The trope of 'biopolitics' is not polemical: 'this new technology does not *replace* the sovereign right to kill, nor has it ever. Biopolitics has always coexisted with the right to kill, both within the state, with the state reserving a notorious monopoly right to use (lethal) force, and outside, with the right of the state to wage war, defensively and typically also offensively' (Kelly 2004, p. 60). The distribution of 'contribution' from members of other 'populations', Kelly argues, 'is not an attempt to strengthen the existing population *qua* the particular individuals who constitute it, but rather to strengthen the population *as a whole*, by incorporating new elements that improve it. Australia *qua* population is trying to strengthen itself as a *nation*' (p. 62). Though the 'other' is allowed in only to add value to the axiomatics of the discourses of the 'population' such as in the case of 'skilled migrants'. Access is driven by what contributions the 'other' can make to the nation's population, not in terms of genetic improvements, but in terms of the economic (Kelly 2004). Though I would argue that the discussion by Kelly of 'biopolitics' and immigration in Australia is a useful contribution, I must add, regarding 'racism' in an Australian context, that not commenting on genocide against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reconstitutes and perpetuates the colonialist positioning of *terra nullius*.

consider that a relation formed between the population and the inferiorised subject can be better understood through the concepts of war, battle and strategy.

A war against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

A connection to Foucault's argument that the disposition of power is a relation of force renders available an analysis where 'relations' are interrogated in 'terms of conflict, confrontation and war' (Foucault 2003, p. 15). Furthermore, Foucault (p. 47) suggested that we consider the question: 'can the phenomenon of war be regarded as primary with respect to other relations [relations of inequality, dissymetries, divisions of labour, relations of exploitation, etc.]?' He argued that in principle the distinction between 'population' and 'inferior subjects' is between investment in 'life', and the allowance to let 'die'.

The 'originary violence' produced by *terra nullius*, which constituted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as an 'inferior subject' and 'subrace' (Foucault 2003), is made visible as a material effect in health outcomes. The density of available empirical data about the morbidity and mortality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people supports the 'let die' rationality of a war against the 'inferior' by and on behalf of 'the population'. The discourse of the federal government's policy of raising pension entitlement ages due to an 'aging population' as an investment in the population's future does not consider the health experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are excluded from the 'population' being 'invested in'. Materially, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are further distanced from being able to access superannuation and/or old age pension entitlements, reinforcing economic disenfranchisement. Understanding as 'letting die' is strengthened further when we connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being subjected to a 300 per cent worse health status than the 'population' with only 17 per cent more health care funding invested (Commonwealth of Australia 2006, p. 115). A statement from Indigenous Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma captured the idea that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives are not invested in: 'it is simply not credible to suggest that a country as wealthy as ours can't fix a health crisis affecting less than three per cent of our citizens' (2005, p. 12). Commissioner Calma suggested that 'these are the killing times'. The 'industrial deafness' (Dodson 1994) of white Australia to the current and historical state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health and wellbeing has connections with, possibly heritage and/or origins in, the 'ideological racism'

Foucault discussed (2003). Yet in a contemporary context it is reproduced and managed under the disciplinary mechanisms and technologies of the ‘best interests’ of the ‘population’, a discourse on ‘population’ that excludes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In ‘peace as a state of coded war’ Foucault (2003, p. 51) invited the consideration of a battle, not between races, but by the race that has the power to reproduce its own knowledge as more true ‘against those who deviate from that norm’ via ‘those institutions within the social body which make the discourse of race struggle function as a principle of exclusion and segregation, and ultimately as a way of normalising society’ (Foucault 2003, p. 61). For Foucault threats to population lie not only at the borders of the land, but reside also in defending ‘against all the biological threats posed by the other race, the subrace, the counter-race’ (pp. 61–62). As the trope is of war and battles, Foucault commented that ‘the notion of strategy is essential if one wants to analyse power ... allows us to analyse power relations as a technique of domination’ (2003, p. 282). The constitution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a subrace post 1788, and reimposed post 1836 as a further component of the Darwinian legacy, is maintained by keeping a certain strategic visibility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Taking up Foucault’s invitation to consider a ‘battle’, a ‘strategic field of visibility’ produces a discourse of ‘subrace’. Deleuze in *Foucault* commented that these ‘visibilities in the light of historical formation, form scenes which are to the visible element what a statement is to the sayable or readable’ (2000, pp. 80–81). The strategic inferiority discursively [trans]forming the fields of visibility surrounding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is an effect of a battle waged against their corporeality, with discourses of ‘state racism’ marking bodies as inferior. For Foucault, truth is not the first casualty of war; it is the prize. The subrace does not exist as a ‘thing’ outside discourse. It is an effect of the discourse, and material impacts on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are an effect of an ‘economy of investment’.

Making the field visible

Foucault argued that historical discourse has a twofold function: to justify power and to make power fascinating. The deeds of great men of the past become the evidence of truth circulating in dominating discourses, though power also provides spaces for a ‘great counter

narrative’ which produces a distributive circuit in which the acts of the past are reconstituted within contemporary versions of ethics and morals. Atrocities become departures from the great emancipatory claims of dominant discourses. Foucault (2003) invited us to notice the blood in the codes, the remnants of battles, the discursive fabulations that reconstituted colonialist discursivities as natural emergences. The strategies of these ‘battles’ Foucault described as the ‘devices that were used to ensure the spatial distribution of individual bodies [their separation, their alignment, their serialisation and their surveillance] and the organization, around those individuals, of a whole field of visibility’ (2003, pp. 241–242). The ‘field of visibility’ is a discursive (re)distribution that incorporeally transforms the ‘possible’ ways of knowing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In tutorials with third and fourth year social work students, I present students with a series of images of Aboriginal men and non-Aboriginal men to produce events in which the mapping of ‘fields of visibility’ can be analysed. I suggest that this is a useful way to form productive connections with ‘inferiorising’ discursivities, traces of which are found in emerging social work identities. The aim is not to shame nor propose a disposition that it is possible to perform ‘no longer racist’ social work, or transcend the privileges inherent in subject positions of white social worker or social work educator. The intention is to render more visible in the Australian context, and possibly others, that to continue to attempt to argue that indifference and/or forms of more overt racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is simply a product of an empty field, of ignorance, is unsustainable and dangerous. For the purpose of ‘visibilising’, students are presented with two images of men that are spontaneously read as connected to Australia: Australian POWs at Changhi and an image of Australian Aboriginal men chained together. The images produce and manage a context where the marking and reading of bodies of white men and Aboriginal men can be analysed for their discursivities. Students are asked ‘What is happening here?’ What become connected with are the circulating discourses that operate to form the thresholds and limits of possible ways of knowing and thus making intelligible and recognisable (Deleuze 2000) the bodies under evaluation. What is generated from these discussions is discourses of Aboriginal men of ‘what have they done?’ and discourses of Changhi POWs of ‘what was done to them?’ What is then discussed is the strategic fields of visibility for Aboriginal men produced and managed as dangerous and/or deficit via extensions and elaborations of circulating and available discourses that both constitute the spontaneity of recognition in the observer and

reciprocally constitute the body being read as receptive to such a reading (Deleuze 2000). Exposing 'strategic fields of visibilities', I argue, is a step towards accepting that emerging social worker identities and concomitant social work practices are troubled and interrupted, and ought to be interrogated in an ongoing way for their material and epistemic, historical and contemporary, links with 'inferiorising' discourses of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Tony Fletcher is a PhD candidate in the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy at the University of South Australia. His research interests include gendered violence, masculinities, whiteness and finding ways to make connections with post-structural scholarship that support the foregrounding of potential and the loosening of grids of possibility in social work practice.

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