Foucault and Racialised Modernity, abridged.

In this paper I will explore the concept of modernity as understood by the 20th century French philosopher Michel Foucault. I will argue, through using Foucault's understanding of discourse and the subject, we can understand the limits to his own conception of modernity. This is because his work is an example of what Aimé Césaire and Sylvia Wynter have described as racialised modernity (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2020). I argue that Foucault's critical conception of modernity is built within the framework of racialised coloniality. I will first outline Foucault's conception of modernity as outlined in four texts published between 1975 and 1984, exploring how his theorising of modernity with reference to history and to the subject interplay. I will then explore how this conception of modernity is built out of racialised coloniality, paying reference particularly to discourses on time and the human.

In his essay *The Art of Telling the Truth* (1984), Foucault traces what he calls an ontology of modernity (which he also refers to as an ontology of the present), through the study of signs[1]. A sign of modernity indicates the existence of a cause "which has guided men down the road of progress throughout history" (Foucault, 1983, pp. 16). Through an analysis of Kant's 1784 essay *Was ist Aufklärung?*, Foucault elaborates that such a sign needs to be rememorativum, demonstrativum, pronosticum: it must indicate that "it was always thus; [that] it is thus now; [that] it will always be thus" (pp. 16). The *thus* being referred to here is the notion at the basis of modernity: a teleological thread of progress.

[1] This text, published in *Magazine Littéaire* in May 1984, is a revised passage from Foucault's first speech during his 1983 lecture series at the Collège de France entitled *The Government of Self and Others.*

Foucault writes that in order to understand the ontology of modernity, it is not enough to follow this teleological thread over time, but instead it is necessary to seek out and isolate an event within that thread which serves as a sign of modernity. Such a sign confirms a "general tendency of the entire human race to advance in the direction of progress" (Foucault, 1983, pp. 17). Following Kant, he chooses the French Revolution as his sign. To Foucault, this event is not important as a modern (or not modern) event, but instead is important as it serves as a sign that can validate the existence of a broader process of linear progression forward.

Foucault identifies the French Revolution as an event which serves as a sign of a broader "disposition" of modernity. We can understand that Foucault's theoretical framing of modernity-as-disposition that is exemplified in the French Revolution is the same modernity which objectivises the subject and rationalises governmenality[2]. Foucault's abstracting out from the French Revolution to a broader process of modernity assumes a position of vantage from a "supplementary space 'outside'" (Bhabha, 1991, pp. 202) from which a clear vision of the French Revolution as encapsulating a universal process of progression can be captured. Ironically, Foucault's "god trick" (Harraway, 1988) falls into the familiar trap which postcolonial theorists have argued is a move to equate a Eurocentric view of history with the position of a "*Cartesian Knower*: "he" who [is] rational, contemplative, and objective so he could transcend his immediate social location" (Go, 2020).

Defending Foucault's notion of modernity, Godfrey (2012) has argued that Foucault's concept of modernity is a historicised account, rather than a universalistic or reified framework. This therefore, he argues, allows space for alternative histories and "modernities", as Foucault's conception of modernity is just one (pp. 3). However, Foucault's

[2] The question here would be whether or not Foucault then also believes that modernity as he describes it in *The Government of Self and Others* is an empirical phenomenon or is also a discourse.

theory of modernity is based in his genealogical method which, in his words "is exactly the opposite of historicism" (Foucault, 1979a, pp. 3). Instead of questioning universals by dissecting them through a historical lens, Foucault's method starts out from "the decision that universals do not exist" (Foucault, 1979a, pp. 3). It then seeks to identify and trace the development of a discourse around notions which are accepted as universals. In this sense, Foucault's understanding of modernity cannot be said to allow for other 'modernities', not because this modernity is universal (and Foucault wouldn't think so), but because it is the totality of discourse of modernity itself that gives the concept power. As I will argue further down, while the discourse of modernity casts the world into a linear teleology of progress, it does not obtain its power through claims of universality. Instead, modernity wields disciplinary power through its dominance of time and linearity, which gives it the power to exclude subjects from the present. As Homi K. Bhabha has put it, Foucault's characterisation of modernity in *The Government of Self and Others* is as a discursive address which holds its authority in defining who is "historically belated" (Bhabha, 1991, pp. 202).

Writing about the relationship between the rationalisation given by modernity and excesses of power, Foucault argued "we should not need to wait for bureaucracy or concentration camps to recognize the existence of such relations". Foucault seems to argue that, along the lines of Hannah Arendt, part of the power of reason and rationality is that it creates a structure of regularity and a Gramscian *common sense*, which then enables the use of power to deadly ends. Indeed Hannah Arendt argued similarly that evil exists in the interstices of banal common sense regulations and quotidian moments such as paperwork, train scheduling and tax brackets. However, the example of the use of concentration camps by the Nazis to illustrate this argument brings to mind the intervention of Aimé Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950). In theorising the extent of shock in Europe following the Holocaust, Césaire agrees with Foucault that the particular character of the violence during Nazism is not

an aberration of western modernity but is instead the culmination of it. However, instead of characterising it as it as the rationalising discourse of modernity extending into banal violence, Césaire argues that the Holocaust was an already existing violence spilling over into the world of "modernity". In other words, the violence of modernity that was prevalent in the colonised world visited the "modern" world.

Césaire argues that what is considered unforgivable about Hitler is not the crime itself, but the humiliation of "man"[3]. By this, Césaire means the "man" that was created and imagined through the Enlightenment. This "man" does not refer to all subjects, but instead refers to a specific "distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois" subject which is created through the framework of modernity (Césaire, 1950, pp. 36). Frantz Fanon captures this bifurcation of the vision of colonial Man from actual man, in his famous adage: "Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them" (1963, pp. 9). To Césaire, it is exactly this conception of the subject cast into *civilisation* through its contrast to *uncivilisation* which gives us Hitler. The crime of Hitler was "the fact that he applied to Europe [the] colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the [colonised]" (pp. 36). In this way, Césaire argues that modernity is neither the problem nor the solution of power; power operates through the construction of some into modernity and some out of it. From this perspective, the power of modernity is not its capacity to subsume the subject into an unquestionable rubric of common sense and reason, but it is its capacity to *exclude* a subject from this very rubric.

[3] Here Césaire stops to point our that this was a "crime against man" (Césaire, 1950, pp. 36), poking a finger at how this phrase conjures the colonial European and white conception of man constructed by discourses on European modernity.

In *Omnes et Singulatim* Foucault describes the "rationalisation of society or of culture [as a whole]" (Foucault, 1979b, pp. 299). In thinking with Césaire's conception of modernity, this rationalisation is a process that occurs alongside a process of subject formation as separate to a colonised other. The subject who is racialised is constructed outside of rationalisation and modernity. Foucault himself goes on to warn against a totalising idea of rationalisation, reminding us that the question is not only whether a subject conforms to rationality or irrationality, but what kind of rationality they are "using" (Foucault, 1979b, pp. 299). However, I argue that in outlining the fractures within the rationalisation of the subject, Foucault commits to the same pattern of building his conception of the subject on the non-colonial subject.

What can be understand from Foucault's use of the French Revolution as his focal "sign" on which to build a theoretical understanding of modernity is not only a eurocentrism in his thinking, but also a tendency to fall into the very universalising trap that he is aiming to avoid. While he does not take the Enlightenment values purportedly formed in the French Revolution as anything more than discursive pillars of the disciplinary power of modernity, his theory of modernity-as-disposition is itself inflected with the discourses which construct modernity as a unified movement. The irony of the French Revolution as the birthplace of a discourse on modernity at a time when a different formation of power was developing in colonised geographies, most notably in San Domingo at the site of it's concomitant revolution, is a sign a theoretical gap in Foucault's thinking about how changing power formations in Europe and colonial constructions developed together.

In setting up his concept of the discourse of modernity as rationalising and objectivising subjects and governmentality, Foucault misses that this discourse is built out of the

manufactured polarity given by a colonial construction of a subject which is not only not modern, but is outside the framework of modernity. Annibal Quijano has argued that the colonised subject is constructed outside of modernity not only because the subject is "historically belated" (Bhabha, 1991, pp. 202), but because the discourse of modernity itself is racialised, it is synonym for colonial European power (Quijano , 2007)

This is significant when thinking about Foucault's writing on modernity, as his work specifically theorises the unique ways in which modernity and rationality "transform human beings into subjects" (Foucault, 1982, pp. 326). However, in thinking through this process, it is necessary to remember that the notion of the subject and the human itself is constructed through a concurrent discourse of coloniality. Sylvia Wynter's retheorisation of the history of the 'human' through the history of colonial violence has revealed how a shift from a God-centric structure of the world and power has given way to a human-centric structure. In some ways, this shift is echoed in Foucault's writing about the development of new modalities of power accompanying a move away from violence and towards discipline and control. However, Wynter argues that the replacement of a drive to Godly redemption with a drive to rational redemption which followed the degodding of the world brought with it a fundamentally new conception of the human (Wynter, 1995). This conception of the human, on which the humanistic secularism of modernity is built, is constructed through a process that she calls an "over-representation of Man" (Wynter, 2003, pp. 267). Like Césaire and Fanon, the "Man" Wynter is referring to here is what she describes as the Enlightenment man, the Darwinian man, of racial coloniality. In this sense, in building an analysis of the discourse of modernity out of the European conception of Man, Foucault risks falling into the same pattern of universalising the parochial dimensions of a discourse on racialised modernity which he is aiming to parochialise (Chakrabarty, 2008).

In a similar vein, what Foucault captures in his articulation of biopower is the shift in the forms of governmentality and power within modernity from the territory to the population as the "key referent for the processes of power" (Godfrey, pp. 1). To cast this idea into a colonial lens, it is not the domination of territory and syphoning off of resources from land that bolsters power in modernity, but instead the delineations of populations into colonised subjectivities. In this sense, the argument given by both Aimé Césaire and Sylvia Wynter that racialised modernity is built on a conception of the human as the white, European, "humanistic" subjectivity formed through coloniality aligns with Foucault's articulation of a evolution of power from violence exacted by a sovereign to violence enacted through "dividing practices" in a process of constructed difference (Foucault, 1982, pp. 778; Hammer, 2020). As Foucault articulated that modernity rests on modalities of power whose focal object is the individual and the population, I argue that both Césaire and Wynter's conceptions of racialised modernity remind us that these modalities of power also rely on delineating and constructing difference *between* populations.

Discipline in modernity relies on the construction of difference between the subject formed in the discourse of modernity and the racialised "other". In contrast to the subject constructed as "modern", the racialised subject is constructed as outside of modernity by being outside of the "distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois" subjectivity (Césaire, 1950). Since modernity through Foucauldian terms is the "ontology of the present", racialised modernity casts the racialised subject as outside of the present (Foucault, 1983, pp. 21). In the words of Johanes Fabian, racialisation depends on a colonial temporality built on the *denial of coevalness* (2014). This casts some subjectivities in the modern - the *present* - and others into the waiting room of history (Chakrabarty, 2008). In this sense, the colonial underpinning

of modernity not only holds different subjectivities apart, but fixes them into different temporalities. In this sense, the power of modernity is shaped by its restructuring of time into racialised temporalities. I argue that the disciplinary power of modernity is possible only because of its different racialisation of subjects into and out of the present. The modernity of the "whole" that Foucault describes is instead a divided racialised modernity in which subjectivity in the present is precarious (Foucault, 1979b, pp. 299).

By suspending in imaginary space an impossible fantasy of multiple temporalities at once, where some people, concepts, beliefs, practices and countries can be 'unmodern' and 'behind' while others are living in the 'modern' present, modernity retains the power to arbitrate which concepts lead us forward. Much as Foucault describes disciplinary power as the machinery of power "that explores [the body], breaks it down and rearranges it", modernity explores time, breaks it down and rearranges it (Foucault, 1975, pp. 74). Instead of making a docile, pliable and practiced body, the disciplinary power at work in modernity makes time pliable and practiced. Modernity dominates the present and shapes behaviour with the consistent threat of being cast out of the present, and thereby out of what is real.

Through an exploration of time and the human in discourses on modernity, I have argued that Foucault's conception of modernity as both a discourse and a disposition of forward movement casts him into a framework of thinking about time and the human which is derived from the same racialised coloniality which underpins discourses of modernity. In seeking out "signs" of modernity from a "supplementary space 'outside'" (Bhabha, 1991, pp. 202), Foucault's modernity rests on the same colonial discourse which arbitrates the present through a racialised lens. A rethinking of modernity along the lines of Wynter leads us to understand its disciplinary power as resting on its construction of an artificial precarity of the present, suspending fractured subjectivities into racialised temporalities.

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