

Subduing Power: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters

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The concept of ‘power’ can refer to the institutionalised and embodied capacity and right to dominate through a variety of means including ideology, politics, science, religion, class, race, gender and sexuality. Early feminist theorising within the West, for example, conceptualised the structure and nature of power as being connected to male domination and authority within society. Marxists, alternately, argue it is the ruling class that holds power and exercises it as owners of the means of production. In a general sense, we can say that as feminists have tied power to patriarchy and Marxists’ definitions of power have been connected to capitalism. The essays in this section, though, are less concerned with such totalising conceptualisations of power than they are with processes of interpellation or subject creation within dominant or dominating discursive spaces.¹ Not power as such, but its many workings and apparatuses.

In surveying the essays from this ‘Power’ section, it is therefore useful to draw on the work of French political theorist and historian Michel Foucault; however, for reasons that will soon become clear, I will also be a little analytically promiscuous.² In a 1976 interview Foucault states:

As soon as one endeavours to detach power with its techniques and procedures from the form of law within which it has been theoretically confined up until now, one is driven to ask this basic question: Isn’t power simply a form of warlike domination? Shouldn’t one therefore conceive all problems of power in terms of relations of war? Isn’t power a sort of generalized war which

assumes at particular moments the forms of peace and the state? Peace would then be a form of war, and the state a means of waging it.³

Foucault's questions about power and war arise from his inversion of Carl von Clausewitz's formulation of war as politics by other means. For Foucault, politics is war by other means; antagonisms, struggles and conflict are processes of war that should be analysed according to a grid of strategies and tactics. Historically, sovereignty and rights are born of war. The relationship between the nobility, the third estate and the king produced a form of society, which became the basis of the modern nation, enabling war to continue within new mechanisms of power. Within the formation of democracy, ensuing conflicts between rulers and ruled increasingly involve a relation between a superior race and an inferior race. As Foucault argues:

the state is no longer an instrument that one race uses against another: the state is, and must be, the protector of the integrity, the superiority, and the purity of the race... racism is born at the point when the theme of racial purity replaces that of race struggle, and when counterhistory begins to be converted into biological racism.⁴

Hence his argument that race, as a biological construct, emerges with the nation-state during the eighteenth century through disciplinary knowledges, such that race becomes a means of regulating and defending society from itself. Describing this form of power as biopower, Foucault notes that war continues in modernity in different forms; sovereignty shifts from a concern with society defending itself from external attacks to focus on its internal enemies. Race becomes the means through which the state's exercise of power is extended from one of 'to let live or die', to one of 'to let live and to make live'.

While Foucault's theory of biopower is useful, it does not account for the whiteness of sovereignty without which biopower could not function. It may be more productive to

consider how the evolution of democracy, through the spread of Europe as empire, served to reinforce white supremacy in the form of biopower. Racial thinking and notions of whiteness were powerfully determinative of imperial maps that were broader than Foucault's genealogy of bourgeois identity and its biopolitics.⁵ Race became the means through which the colonising state's exercise of power does not shift but is extended from one of 'to let live or die', to one of 'to let live or die and to make live'. Relations of empire through diaspora and occupation of Indigenous lands are immanent, not exterior, aspects of biopower. Thus Indigenous peoples within empire becomes the subject of colonial violence and dispossession — subjects made to live and die. In this sense, the Indigenous subject is marked by its proximity to death, demonstrating most pointedly the contradictory promise of citizenship to let live and make live.

The essays in this section all demonstrate, in different ways, how racialised power operates to enable and constrain Indigenous subjects in Australia and New Zealand; societies structured by white possession that actively work to dispossess Indigenous subjects of their sovereignty. If we trace the assumption of British sovereignty over Indigenous lands — whether this be by *terra nullius* as in Australia or treaty as in New Zealand — these moments mark the kind of racialised power relations that continue to colonise through time, albeit in different forms so that Aborigines and Maori live their lives in and through struggle.⁶ As Indigenous subjects they are subjected to racialised colonising power that works through discursive and non-discursive means. The Australian and New Zealand states have developed and enshrined conceptualisations of 'Aborigines' and 'Maoris' in settler law through legal definitions. The law presumes to regulate who is entitled to be a property owning Indigenous subject, with entitlements and rights. Indigeneity marks the ways in which subjects will be governed and disciplined through various legal and political mechanisms. Subjection to these racialised forms of power is not shared with non-Indigenous subjects; it is the preserve of the Indigenous.

We can ascertain from Tess Lea's essay how racialised power is not deterministic but rather involves processes of

normalisation, reproduced by and within health care intervention, to deal with the Indigenous as abnormal. Lea provides an excellent account of how normalising discourses about the transformative effects of scientific knowledge, predicated on a particular construction of white subjectivity, are performed by white health professionals in the Northern Territory. These health care professionals believe in the transformative pedagogies and statistical truths they deploy and discursively perpetuate as the 'Aboriginal health crisis' through a discourse of Aboriginal dysfunction and abnormality; the crisis then can be ameliorated by these professionals 'enlightening' Aboriginal people about how sick they really are. The supposition is that once Aboriginal people become properly knowledgeable they will take remedial action. As a disciplining technique, health education is the means by which Aboriginal people become subjected to white normative health practices that are the solution. Lea's work shows that subjectification as a power effect has produced an unintended outcome: reinscribing white health care professionals' enlightenment discourse as they seek to improve Aboriginal health. As subjects, white health care professionals discipline themselves through a process of health care normalisation.

Moving from the Northern Territory to Queensland, Aboriginal scholar Bronwyn Fredericks focuses on demonstrating what prevents Aboriginal women from accessing health services. Fredericks undertook research with Aboriginal women to ascertain their views on the accessibility and delivery of health services. Fredericks' research illuminates that Aboriginal women know and understand when they are sick, but seeking treatment depends on a number of variables, the most important of which is the degree of inclusiveness of the health service place and space. Regrettably, these spaces and places are disciplined by health discourses, not the subjugated knowledges or experiences of Aboriginal women, designed and configured through white spatial norms that are also signified in the material objects on display. The power effect of such significations and spatial distribution is the reinforcement of Aboriginal women's exclusion from white health care services. As Fredericks argues, many Aboriginal women who know that they are sick will not enter a place

that is replete with markers of inclusion for white people and, thereby, marked out as being the preserve of white possessiveness. Through discursive practices, health services become spaces and places of exclusion because they are designed for a particular white subject of modernity that equates care of the self with hygiene and the disciplinary power of medicine. The delivery of these services occurs on Aboriginal lands that were never ceded. The inclusiveness of a place will be evaluated through Aboriginal discursive practices based on knowledges and histories of exclusion and dispossession. As relay points within a network of power, Aboriginal female subjects have the capacity to act but this action depends on their assessment of the degree of inclusiveness of white inhabited spaces and places.

Lisa Slater's essay on Aboriginal wellbeing and the making of a good life through Aboriginal cultural festivals can be read in tandem with Lea and Fredericks. Slater's work demonstrates that Aboriginal cultural festivals enable the nourishing of wellbeing because they are places where Aboriginal cultural discourses flourish, sustained by Aboriginal knowledges and truths. They are positive places of celebration and cultural sharing; discursive and material spaces for cultural reproduction and wellness of Aboriginal participants. The Aboriginal wellbeing discourse includes a healthy body, a body that is spiritually and culturally connected to family, community and country. This is an semi-autonomous zone where the capillary power effects of white normalising regimes become subdued as another form of power flows from the land and into bodies that are incommensurate in their ontological existence; bodies that struggle for life beyond the discourse of dysfunction that seeks to annihilate them.

The Aboriginal struggle against the state of perpetual dispossession, in its many forms, is a daily occurrence. Tony Birch reminds us of this in his essay, outlining a potted history of the mistreatment of Aboriginal peoples by the juridical mechanisms of settler/white law, statecraft and sovereignty. He argues that the power effects of colonialism include the persistent requirement that Aboriginal people must act as dispossessed subjects. They must refrain from asserting ownership and moral authority, and yet our sovereignty

prevails as an incommensurable difference that is embodied and ontologically tied to country.⁷ Birch implores us to deploy our sovereignty to act to protect our rights and the rights of others who wish to live in or visit our country. This enactment of Aboriginal power is also the focus of Gillian Cowlshaw's essay, arguing that Aborigines in the New South Wales town of Bourke transgress white social norms in public spaces in ways that simultaneously counter and reinscribe national truths about dysfunctional Aborigines. Deploying normative anti-social behaviour, their ritualised public performances are often explicitly designed to offend white sensibilities. In this way they challenge the white possessive claim to public space. However, this public display of Aboriginal power is limited by state intervention in the form of the police who utilise the force of the law to attend to Aboriginal unruly behaviours. Cowlshaw clearly demonstrates that Murriss' codes of social behaviour, cultural mores and humour function as circuit breakers in public space, often delimiting and undermining juridical forms of power, while in the Aboriginal domain, beyond public space, white juridical forms of power are subdued.

Deborah Bird Rose argues that power circulates through discourse and its effects shape the way knowledge is valued. She proposes that the West must desist from the monologue it conducts with itself, producing only discourses and disciplinary knowledges that reflect inverted logics of modernity in order to maintain power and superiority over what constitutes knowledge; an 'other' can only function as it is defined. Rose notes that racial tropes of colonisation invoke a kind of ecological racism whereby imprudent, careless and lazy 'natives' practice environmental mismanagement or, on the other hand, are romanticised as the perfect environmentalists. They are caught within both discourses. Bird Rose explains that there must be a dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on ethical grounds, one that is inclusive of Aboriginal knowledges and their relationships to place, nature and other species and history. Aboriginal knowledge, Bird Rose suggests, involves sustainable reciprocity.

The use of particular discourses to subjectify and dominate Aboriginal peoples is also evident in my own essay. I argue

that the discourse of pathology deployed by patriarchal white sovereignty to intervene in the lives of Aboriginal people within the Northern Territory manifests as pathological behaviour by the state. Within the race war, citizenship rights are used as methods of subjugation to let Aboriginal people live and to make them live as welfare dependents to be regulated, disciplined and dominated into complicity. Patriarchal white sovereignty, as a regime of power, functions pathologically through various mechanisms and embodied relay points, making Aboriginal people targets of state violence. Despite the exercise of juridical power this violence has not produced the 'good Aboriginal citizen'. Virginia Watson's essay also addresses the limited reach of a racialised juridical power, demonstrating how the state's discourse of social crisis was deployed to change policy, remove ATSIC and proceed down the path of 'practical reconciliation' to discipline Aboriginal subjects into becoming self-reliant and responsible. Watson argues that the new policy will be difficult to manage at the periphery where Aboriginal social values and practices shape the sociality of the community in which policy is to be implemented. Here, complex Aboriginal relations of dependency confer authority, affirm social status and agency within a cultural realm that privileges such behaviours.

In his analysis of Te Papa Tongarewa museum's aesthetic practices, Ben Dibley illustrates the power effects of neoliberal and bicultural discourses in shaping the way in which, as a discursive project, the museum represents and fabricates New Zealand's national identity. Dibley argues that critiques of the museum have all too readily misread its signs through the obvious; its lack of recognition of colonial trauma and history, the Disney-like physicality, the lack of clear aesthetic boundaries between what is low and high art, the kitsch nature of the displays, and so on. Taken together these critiques misread the power effects of an antipodean camp aesthetic style that uses bricolage, frivolity, mockery and irony to be ostentatious and bold in the immediacy of the present, decontextualised from the past, in order to signify a Pakeha future. As an apparatus of the state, the museum nominally signifies Maori ontology—Te Papa Tongarewa—while remaining a space where capillaries of racialised colonising power displace

Maori sovereignty to secure a white national identity for New Zealand's future.

I want to return now to Foucault's proposition that we need to think beyond juridical power, bound up with the sovereignty of monarchical or democratic right, to reveal its limitations. Foucault's analytics are concerned with how biopower operates rather than who holds power. He requires us to 'study [bio]power by looking, as it were, at its external face, at the point where it relates directly and immediately to what we might, very provisionally, call its object, its target, its field of application, or, in other words, the places where it implants itself and produces its real effects'.⁸ To attend to this task we must look for subjects who submit to racialised power as well as exercise it as relay points of power. Racialised power is relational, enabling and constraining, operating through discursive and non-discursive means.

The essays in this section of *History, Power, Text* demonstrate the importance of exploring the capillaries of power at the periphery, where most Indigenous people are positioned, in order to understand how forms of racial subjugation and domination and their connections to apparatuses of knowledge and regulation work. They reveal not only the enabling and constraining dimensions of racialised power; they also expose the incommensurability of Indigenous sovereignty as a different form of power. This latter sovereignty — Indigenous sovereignty — can subdue and limit biopower because the disciplinary knowledges and regulatory mechanisms deployed to erase or displace it are constitutive of, and constituted by, a different episteme.

Notes

- 1 My task here is not to evaluate different conceptualisations of power, as others have provided greater intellectual insight. For example, see Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd edn, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004; Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996.
- 2 Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith, *Theorizing Native Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2014.
- 3 Michel Foucault. 'Truth and Power' in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader*, Penguin Books, New York, 1991, p. 65.
- 4 Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*, Picador, New York, 2004, p. 81.

- 5 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1995.
- 6 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd edn, Zed Books, London and New York, 2012.
- 7 See also Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'I Still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society' in Sara Ahmed (ed.), *Uprootings/Regroundings*, Berg, New York, 2003, pp. 23-40.
- 8 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 28.