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Racial states – gendered nations

On biopower, race, and sex

Sarah Bracke and Luis Manuel Hernández Aguilar

Introduction¹

When Michel Foucault (1990) began interrogating biopower in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, the category of sex occupied a critical position in this thinking as it linked the microphysics of power aimed at disciplining the body with the larger project of control and regulation of the population. Sex thus figured at the juncture of the body and the population, pertaining both to the life of the body as well as to the life of the species. When Foucault (1997; see also: Foucault, 2007; Foucault, 2008) subsequently further developed his thesis of biopower in the lecture series *Society must be Defended*, he was concerned with thinking about the state, historical discourse as a weapon of power, and the category of race in the frame of biopower. Here, the critical category of sex receded to the background of his analysis. Moreover, most of Foucault's work has avoided or failed to attend to the question of sexual differentiation (Braidotti, 1994; Grosz, 1994). In this contribution, we revisit and critically engage with a biopolitical analytic of power in a way that attends to not only to how race and racial differentiation are situated at the heart of biopower, but equally engages sex and sexual differentiation.

We do so in order to address the scholarly lacuna identified by David Goldberg (2002), i.e. the historical co-definition of race and the state in its modern manifestations. According to Goldberg (2002: 2), the growing literature on state formation has avoided dealing with the implication of race within processes of state formation, while research on race and racism has circumvented, to a large extent, the function of the state in the formation of racial configurations and exclusions. Yet race, as Goldberg argued,

is integral to the emergence, development, and transformations (conceptually, philosophically, materially) of the modern nation-states ... racial configuration fashions the terms of the founding myth, the fabrication of historical memory, necessary (as Charles Tilly insist) to both the discursive production and ideological rationalization of modern state power.

(Goldberg, 2002: 4)

Furthermore, racial states have elaborated, circulated, and predicated a linkage between the notion of race and a conceptualization of homogeneity defined in national terms. In other words, states have defined, invested, and promoted projects of racial homogeneity,

which also necessitated and operated through sexual differentiation, as we will argue. In this contribution, we take Foucault's theoretical and methodological elaboration on race and the state as a fruitful starting point to bridge the gap identified by Goldberg regarding the co-definition of race and the state. Moreover, we also contend that this analysis should proceed by taking into account the way in which race and the state are also co-defined by sex and sexual differentiation. The argument thus proceeds as follows. First, we briefly sketch Foucault's methodological approach toward institutions and the state which we will apply in our analysis. Second, we rehearse the thesis of biopower and lay out the centrality of race and racism within the biopolitical analytic. Finally, we (re-)engage sex and sexual differentiation – including various arguments positioning gender at the core of the production and reproduction of nationalism – at the heart of biopower. Following Kyla Schuller (2018), we make an argument for recovering the centrality of sex within the context of biopower in order to understand how the state, through biopolitical power, effects and works upon caesuras on racial and sexual differentiation. For its functioning as the mechanism of power granting life and letting die, biopower crafts not only a racial caesura determining the parameters of who lives and who is left to die, but also necessitates power techniques oriented toward reproducing the life of that segment of population deemed racially superior. Sex differentiation in the form of binary heteronormativity then appears precisely as that technique inciting and seeking to secure the reproduction of the nation.

Approaching the state: suspending universals

While Foucault has often been charged with lacking a detailed and elaborated method (Gutting, 2001), in the lecture series *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault, 2007) he outlined three methodological procedures with which he undertook his de-centered analysis of institutions – including the state – articulated with power-knowledge relations. The first analytical procedure involves a displacement outside the institution, “moving off-center in relation to the problematic of the institution or what could be called the ‘institutional-centric’ approach” (Foucault, 2007: 116). Rather than focusing on institutions, Foucault seeks to uncover techniques and procedures generating the institutions, that is to say, the discourses, subject formations, and social relations that are codified, condensed, and reproduced by institutions. The second methodological movement outside the institution consists of analyzing its purpose. According to Foucault (2007: 117), the history of institutions is not determined by the failure or success of their imputed functions. The examination of the expected purpose of an institution should therefore be suspended, and the institutional setting should be inserted into the general economy of power relations. And finally, the third strategy can be found in the refusal to put an already defined object at the center of analysis; “instead, it involved grasping the movement by which a field of truth with objects of knowledge was constituted through these mobile technologies” (Foucault, 2007:118).

The method outlined by Foucault proposes an alternative view on how to think of and analyze institutions (and one may even argue categories of analysis) by moving outside the institutions, and thereby releasing power relations from their institutional constraints in order to analyze them from the advantageous point of view of the technologies of power. These methodological procedures, one might argue, emanate from the epistemological point of departure which Foucault captured in the phrase: “Let's suppose that universals do not exist” (Foucault, 2008:3). Suspending universals operates as a critique of the kind of sociological analysis that deduces concrete problems on the basis of prefigured universal categories such as the state, civil society or the market. And we might add, stretching Foucault's argument,

that it also questions analyses that take prefigured categories of race, class, and gender as their point of departure (see also: Puar, 2012). The incitement to “suppose that universals do not exist” entails a theoretical and methodological position which shifts the analytical focus to the practices sustaining and shaping those universals. That is to say, it urges us to consider the state – and also race and gender for that matter – as an effect of power/knowledge relations and technologies of power such as discipline (the modality of power that produces docile bodies), biopolitics (the power to manage life and its reproduction), and governmentality (the rational strategy to conduct conducts).

In this sense, the state should be interpreted neither as a given fact nor as a singular event, but rather “as a contingent political process” (Lemke, 2007: 46), subjected to continual conflicts, stabilizations, and transmutations,

Rather, the state is conceptualized as a ‘transactional reality’ [réalité de transaction] (Foucault, 2004: 301), that is to say a dynamic ensemble of relations and syntheses that at the same time produces the institutional structure of the state and the knowledge of the state ... The assumption that the state does not exist is followed by the question of how different elements and practices made it possible that something like the state possesses a historical reality and structural consistency over a longer period of time.

(Lemke, 2007: 48)

The relevance of Foucault’s method for analyzing the state resides in not taking for granted what is usually apprehended as such, and instead investigating the power relations and mechanisms that create the categories in first place, a principle that also applies to Foucault’s inquiry into race and racism, and its function within the biopolitical technology of power.

Biopower, race, and racism

Foucault began developing his biopower thesis in the last chapter of his interrogation of the history of sexuality, an analytic move that took him from the micro toward the macrophysics of power. Yet this purportedly sudden turn from the microphysics of power towards the governmentalized state, as Bob Jessop (2013: 140) has pointed out, might also be seen as a smooth transition from the study of institutions and modalities of power toward a wider frame, namely, the techniques with respect to state forces: biopower and governmentality.

In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1990: 145) considered the configuration of “sex as a political issue” in a twofold manner. First, sex was part of the arrangements of disciplinary techniques directed at the body, and second, sex was also deployed in the regulation and management of the social body, the population. Sexuality thus constitutes the link between regulatory power and discipline. On the one hand, discipline operating at the level of the body, and on the other hand, biopower working at the level of the production, control, and regulation of populations. Sex linked the life of the individual body to the life of the species as a whole and became the axis of micro and macro technologies of power. In the words of Foucault (1990: 147 [emphasis in the original]), “Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality”.

This is the point where race entered biopower’s analytics. According to Stoler, what links Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* with the 1976’s lectures is the argument “that the emergence of biopower inscribed modern racism in the mechanism of the normalizing state” (Stoler,

1995: 55). In his lectures, Foucault focused on the modern state and the emergence of state racism as a part of it. Biopower, in this view, was a crucial feature of racism, in the same vein as racism was a crucial feature of biopower.

Foucault was, however, not interested in the break of modern racism with what could be seen as previous and older forms of the phenomenon. Rather, his concerns centered on the discursive bricolage whereby an old discourse of race was recovered, reactivated, modified, and embedded in new forms, thus crafting new statements and relations (Stoler, 1995). In this vein, and drawing upon a Foucaultian perspective, Kyla Schuller proposes us to think race in terms of a palimpsest, in which one meaning and conceptualization of race is inscribed upon the other – older – one in such a way that each contemporary notion of race always carries visible traces of those earlier inscriptions (Schuller, 2018: 97). Such an approach to race is consequential when it comes to understanding racism. Following Foucault, Stoler (2002: 376) argues that “polyvalent mobility” represents one of racism’s defining features, namely, racism’s discursive capacity to renew itself, to be used in different ways and for diverse purposes, e.g. by the state or by actors opposing the state. Racism can be a narrative of state power, but also a counter-narrative opposing the state (Stoler, 2002: 376).

It is, therefore, possible to talk about a dynamic racism – a racism of expansion having different historical moments, conjunctures, and varieties. Stuart Hall (1971, 2000) developed a similar argument, reasoning that racial formations have been produced and molded by specific and historical relations of power thereby developing different and in-situ historiographies. Thus, when analyzing a specific socio-historical reality, instead of *racism* the more appropriate label would be *racisms* (Hall, 2000: 11).

The polyvalent mobility of racism highlights its capacity to draw from old racial vocabularies while aligning its arguments with contemporary political claims. It also underscores the flexibility of racism in its different configurations productively incorporating and refashioning categories such as religion, culture, class, sexuality, and gender intertwined in the process of fixing ontologies and creating hierarchies between them, influencing processes of inclusion and exclusion, violence, discrimination, establishing privileges, but also producing and being produced by state projects of homogeneity. Racism and its meanings are neither immutable nor final.

Thus, the main task when analyzing racist discourses does not reside in determining their newness or oldness, but in exploring how they are produced, reproduced, and utilized. In other words, the task consists of unpacking which power relations created these racist discourses, and what are racism’s political consequences in a particular context. Likewise, we should be looking at how racist discourses produce consent and legitimacy between groups and individuals with dissimilar access to resources and in different positions. One might also wonder about the relation between the spread of racial statements and their use as a means to legitimate policies, stricter measures of surveillance and control, exclusionary practices and consent about their implementation. Last but not least, the analysis of racial discourses should inquire not only about the racially characterized subjects that they manufacture, but also about the relational aspect of such a process, that is, how the dominant identity is imagined and reified as the positive counterpart of the racialized representation of the Other.

If the state might be approached as a “transactional reality” and racism as a “polyvalent discourse”, biopower, according to Foucault, represents the technology of power inscribing racism in the mechanisms of the state (1997: 254), thus establishing the distinction between what must live from what must die, by producing a set of differences and hierarchies among the continuum of the human race,

this will allow power to treat the population as a mixture of races, or to be more accurate to treat the species, to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known as races. That is the first function of racism, to create caesura within the biological continuum addressed by biopower.

(Foucault, 1997: 255)

The first function of racism within the biopolitical scheme posits the idea that society must defend itself. It has to be purified from the permanent threat posed by its own internal dangers – the inferior races within. Racism creates the need to protect the society, allowing the inscription of this principle in the state's mechanisms, which enacted different techniques in the name of defending the social body whereby

we see the appearance of a State racism: a racism that society will direct against itself, against its own elements, and its own products. This is the internal racism of permanent purification, and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization.

(Foucault, 1997: 62)

This first function is complemented by a second one, the warfare relation, which entails the recoding of the discourse on war as a means to understand power relations and its working in dividing the social body, in which in order to live you must kill, for racism the sentence is translated into “if you want to live, the other must die” (Foucault, 1997: 255). In the words of Foucault,

racism justifies the death-function in the economy of biopower by appealing to the principle that the death of others makes one biologically stronger insofar as one is a member of a race or a population, insofar as one is an element in a unitary living plurality.

(Foucault, 1997: 258)

Henceforth, the work of racism in a biopolitical state enables, on the one hand, the elimination of the biological menace, and on the other hand, the improvement of the race. Racism makes killing acceptable.

The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make my life in general healthier and purer.

(Foucault, 1997: 255)

Improving by eliminating, eliminating to improve,

In this light, the systematic genocidal campaigns mounted by a political state such as Nazi Germany must, Foucault suggests, be seen as consistent with the emergence of biopower in modernity. To the extent that the purity of blood – and of race defined in terms of genetic heritage – is the primary reason used for the extermination of those who are branded as unclean, racial discrimination is a logical manifestation of biopower, the point of which, it should be emphasized, is not simply to kill but to generate life, to manage and optimize it, to make it better for the future of the human species.

(Chow, 2002: 7)

In this sense, according to Stoler (1995: 84), biopower established “a *positive* relation between the right to kill and the assurance of life. It posits that ‘the more you kill [and] ... let die, the more you will live’.” Henceforth, racism reactivated the discourse of permanent war in a novel way by “establishing a biological confrontation between my life and the death of others” (Stoler, 1995: 85).

Killing in Foucault’s terms also refers to political death, which does not entail a direct act of extermination or murdering, but denotes the rejection and expulsion of the inferior races from the political body. In other words, biopower equally manifests itself through mechanisms of segregation, exclusion, and discrimination. Thus, racism works as the principle that justifies the death function of the technology of power aimed at the population by direct or indirect killing.

The peculiarity of modern racism therefore resides in its linkage and articulation with the technology of biopower. Racism thus is linked to the functioning of the state, which uses race as the principle for purifying the society from its internal enemies; as such, biopower marks a transition from sovereign power, “which either put to death or let live” towards the biopolitical frame where the state “let die and granted life” (Lemke, 2019: 137). The conceptualization of the state entails a collective body that should manage life, “racism is intrinsic to the nature of all modern, normalizing states and their biopolitical technologies” (Stoler, 1995: 88).

Revisiting biopower and sexual differentiation

This administration and management of life, however, begs the question of social and biological reproduction, which is not only the reproduction of life but also of race, of life that is reproduced – or prevented from reproducing – as racial difference. This is where sex is central to biopolitics, as a technology of reproduction: sex and its fertility had to be administered, and emerged as a result of the deployment of sexuality (Foucault, 1990). While Foucault understood sex to be crucially situated at the intersection of the life of the body and the life of the population or species, he avoided or failed to think sexual differentiation (Braidotti, 1994; Grosz, 1994).

Stoler, moreover, makes a similar suggestion in relation to the nation and also empire. She criticizes Foucault’s lack of engagement with the significance of the discourse of nation and empire and its gender-specificity, since “Europeanness was not only class-specific but gender coded” (Stoler, 1995: 115). Foucault’s account of the cultivation of the bourgeois-self remained rooted in Europe, as if the West functioned as a self-contained entity (Spivak, 1994), a narration that is rebuked by the history of colonialism and imperialism. In addition, the cultivation of the bourgeois-self transpired through a wider world of Manichean distinctions, where the non-European Others provided the contrast positing the racially characterized colonized body as the negative counterpart to the European “healthy vigorous bourgeois body” (Stoler, 1995: 8). Foucault’s lack of analysis of how biopower, race, sexuality, and sex were articulated in the colonies, obscured the crafting of subjugated bodies crucial for the development of his history of sexuality, for as Stoler (1995: 15) points out, the colonies functioned as “laboratories of modernity” in which the technologies of power were rehearsed.

Furthermore, as Schuller (2018: 20) has recently documented, biopower also operated and was deployed through the regulation of “sentiment and affect as sites of Imperial control”. These critiques and further elaborations of Foucault’s biopower do not discard the analytics of power put forward by the French philosopher; rather, they open new venues of analysis, while complementing the ubiquitous operations of a technology of power that has not respected

national borders. One of these venues pertains to the co-constitutive relation between the inscription of race in the state on the one hand, and the operations of gender in the production of nationalisms as well as the function of sexual differentiation within the biopolitical frame on the other. Racial states, as Goldberg noted, are also gendered states. This means that the inscription of race in the mechanisms of the state or the configuration of the state through racial principles is tied up with the production of gendered identities. But gender, following Anne McClintock (1995: 352), has, in different ways, been coupled with the other part of the dyad of the nation-state. “All nationalisms are gendered,” McClintock has argued (1995: 352), which entails the dependence of nations upon the social construction of race and gender for the reproduction of the imagined community, and the crafting of gendered national identities and their reproduction. Nationalisms have been played out to draw, circulate, and reify symbolic boundaries and distinctions between men and women. The gendered character of the nation and nationalism has been investigated by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1993; Yuval-Davis, 1997), who argue that the implication of women in the gendered reproduction of the nation and its relation with state practices can be analytically distinguished in five categories (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1993: 115). First, women are situated as the subjects reproducing the ethnic group and the nation in biological terms – a reproduction which has more recently been rethought as “regeneration”, as non-heteronormative modes of the reproduction of life have found their place within the folds of the nation (see Puar, 2007 on homonationalism; Schuller, 2018). Second, women have been cast as the subjects who delimit the ethnic boundaries (see also: Stoler, 1995). Third, still according to Anthias and Yuval-Davis, women have been positioned as active conveyors of national culture. On a symbolic level, moreover, women have been seen as vehicles for the reproduction of national identities, which constitutes a fourth way in the nation is gendered. And finally, women have been “as participants in national, economic, political and military struggle” (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1993: 115). These distinct albeit inter-related dimensions affirm that process of nation-building are profoundly sexually differentiated, and sexually differentiating, projects. Projects, in other words, that produce national gender identities.

Additionally, McClintock (1995: 355) argues that nationalisms are produced by and reproduce gendered discourses intertwined with dislocated projections of time, in which the nation comprises contradictory narratives about past and future, which are

resolved by figuring the contradiction in the representation of times as a natural division of gender. Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural). Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic) embodying nationalism’s progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity.

(McClintock, 1995: 359)

These various analyses affirm that, within a biopolitical analytic, sexual differentiation, and indeed the gender categories resulting from this differentiating, are crucial for the nation-state. Biopower divides the population into who lives and who doesn’t live in other words, biopower establishes racial taxonomies and hierarchies, and race “stabilizes the economic and biological health of the population”, according to Kyla Schuller, (2018: 16), which in turn enables the development of civilization. The stabilization of civilization, Schuller continues, occurs through sexual differentiation. Schuller develops this argument through an investigation of “impressibility” as a “key measure of racially and sexually differentiating the refined, sensitive, and civilized subject, who was embedded in time and capable of progress” (Schuller,

2018: 8). Sex difference, she argues, divides the civilized body into two halves, with a more susceptible female half that thus relieves the other, male, half of the burden of embodiment and too much susceptibility, and thereby establishes the male connection to reason. Rationality, in other words, which operates as a key-component of civilization, is made possible because of sexual difference. “Binary sex is both the cause and effect of reason,” Schuller argues, that is to say, it represents a division of sexual labor that secures reason to be on the side of men (Schuller, 2018: 16).

In this vein, the purported lack of rationality among the “less civilized” is the expression of another, more fundamental, lack, i.e. sexual difference. In her work on sex and secularism, Joan Scott (2018) demonstrates that “the presumed natural difference of the sexes was the social foundation of modern Western nation-states”, as sexual difference was deployed to establish the racial superiority of the West (Scott, 2018: 18). In a conception and self-understanding of modernity as a social formation based on increased (functional) differentiation, sexual differentiation understood as an ontological distinction between the sexes was taken to be a sign of modernity, both in its association with the West as well as in its implementation by colonial powers (Scott, 2018: 27). This point has been further elaborated by scholars seeking to decolonize gender. In her critical examination of Western gender discourses from an African standpoint, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, (1997) has argued that a rigid binary understanding of sex, tightly connected to gender, was not an organizing principle of Yoruba society prior to Western colonization. Thinking from a Latin American context, María Lugones (2010) has argued that the Western “gender system is not just hierarchical but racially differentiated” (Lugones, 2010: 748), in a way in which the hegemonic gender taxonomy serves racial differentiation which not only denies humanity to the colonized, but indeed also gender. Put differently, the denial of “proper” sexual differentiation, and subsequent gendered identities, among the colonized was a crucial way in which the humanity of the colonized was denied. Or in words that resonate with Foucault’s lectures: in a modern Western context sexual differentiation developed as a “defense” strategy, defending the social body and the racial differentiation that defines it, including what Foucault refers to as the permanent purification of internal racism.

In her study on the biopolitics of feelings, Schuller suggests that we should understand sexual difference as a function of race (Schuller, 2018: 17). Binary sexual differentiation, together with “civilized sexuality”, “linking the two halves [of the population] under strict conditions of reproductive monogamy” (Schuller, 2018: 108) has come to accomplish the biopolitics of racial differentiation, not only through “reproducing the nation” but also reproducing civilization as a means of racial hierarchy. Sexual difference, in other words, as it has emerged in the context of Western modernity, is also racial distinction. Racial power, as Schuller puts it, has delineated the notion of “woman”, and their corresponding physical attributes and affective capacities (Schuller, 2018: 133), and regulates who has access to (claim) femininity. The notion of woman, in other words, emerged as a biopolitical subjectivity conceived within racial hierarchies of civilization (Schuller, 2018: 103).

Conclusion

The biopolitical analytic, as put forward by Foucault and critically elaborated by many others – notably with the aim of incorporating colonialism and empire within the analytic (Stoler, 1995) as well as thinking necropolitics (Mbembé, 2003) – remains very apt, we insist, to account for the endurance of race and racisms and their functioning within modern states. Yet at the heart of this biopolitical analytic lies a notion of sex, which operates as the juncture between the (disciplined) body and the (regulated) population, and a process of

sexual differentiation, which accounts for the reproduction of race and racial differentiation, along the construction of national identities and myths.

To put this in a different way all together, we might argue that *History of Sexuality* is (also) an account of the emergence of modern race in Western Europe. Yet while Foucault has left us with a seminal account of modern sex and sexuality, sexual differentiation remains undertheorized within this biopolitical analytic. Elaborating a biopolitical focus on sexual differentiation, as the work of Schuller (2018) does, enables a better understanding of how deeply racialized hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity are, and the significant extent to which patterns of sexual differentiation are indeed patterns of racial differentiation.

Considering sexual difference in terms of the production of race difference might suggest that sexual difference can be relegated to a secondary role, or an analogical effect of racial formation (Schuller, 2018:17). Yet this biopolitical analytic holds a different analytical promise. It recognizes that sexual difference is at the heart of racial formation and indeed racism, while, conversely, race is inscribed at heart of the Western gender system with its tenets of binary sex and heteronormativity. It also questions *certain* more recent understandings or applications of intersectionality in which gender and race are understood as prefigured categories which subsequently intersect with each other – an understanding of intersectionality which has been critiqued in various manners (see notably Puar, 2012, but also Bilge, 2013). The biopolitical analytic invites us to, at least temporarily, suspend any ontological, prefigured or descriptive nature to categories of analysis such as race, sex, and gender. Instead, it proposes to inquire about the power relations, forces, and mechanisms at play in the formation of these categories and social ontologies. Suspending the existence of these categories is not equivalent to denying their effects in the social world, but often analyses investigating such effects grant a certain degree of stability to these categories. What we have proposed so far is taking a step back and interrogating those discourses, relations, and mechanisms of power creating the conditions of appearance of categories such as race, gender, class, and one may add religion and class as well. Here we might return to and paraphrase Foucault; our analyses might benefit from supposing that race, sex, and gender do not exist.

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