The War on Terror and Ontopolitics: Concerns with Foucault’s Account of Race, Power Sovereignty

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Abstract

In this article, I explore several of Foucault’s claims in relation to race, biopolitics, and power in order to illuminate some concerns in the wake of the post-9.11.01 political regime of population management. First, what is the relationship between sovereignty and power? Foucault’s writings on the relation between sovereignty and power seem to differ across his writings, such that it is not clear whether he had definitively circumscribed the role of sovereignty in relation to “power.” Second, while central sovereign authority, at least in “Society Must Be Defended” has been displaced by Foucault’s analysis of power, the question still remains as to what drives or instantiates the exercise of power. I lay out an account of what I will call “ontopolitics,” as one that foregrounds the role of sovereign authority in ascribing racial divisions. Moreover, these divisions are driven by cultural, social, and moral criteria that complement—or circumscribe—biopolitics—and are inscribed at the level of the ontological, or onto-ethical.

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Falguni A. Sheth is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Political Theory at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, US. Her research is located in the interstices of continental philosophy, political and legal theory, philosophy of race, and Asian American diaspora studies. She has published numerous articles and two books, Race, Liberalism, and Economics (coedited, U. Michigan Press, 2004) and Toward a Political Philosophy of Race (SUNY Press, 2009). Her current research is in several areas: hybrid subjectivity and race; Foucault’s biopolitics in the context of legal subjectivity; the emergence and legal construction of Punjabi-Mexicans at the turn of the 20th century; and the metaphysics of misrecognition. Sheth has served on the Immigrant Rights Commission of San Francisco, and is an organizer of the California Roundtable for Philosophy and Race. For more information, visit her website: http://helios.hampshire.edu/~fasHA/Sheth_WebSite/Homepage.html
Obama’s Semantics War: Any Friend of Yours is a Friend of Mine. “Flynn incurred the wrath of the [Obama] White House by insisting on telling the truth about Syria... He thought truth was the best thing and they shoved him out.” – Patrick Lang (retired army colonel, served for nearly a decade as the chief Middle East civilian intelligence officer for the Defense Intelligence Agency). China understands that the best way to combat the terrorist
recruiting that is going on in these regions is to offer aid towards reconstruction and economic development projects. By 2016, China had allegedly committed more than $30 billion to postwar reconstruction in Syria. The War on terror, also known as the Global War on Terrorism and U.S. War on Terror, is an international military campaign launched by the United States government after the September 11 attacks. The targets of the campaign are primarily Sunni Islamic fundamentalist armed groups located throughout the Muslim world, with the most prominent groups being Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, the Taliban, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, and the various franchise groups of the former two organizations. The naming of the The War on Terror includes the Afghanistan War and the War in Iraq. It added $2.4 trillion to the debt as of the FY 2020 budget. President Bush announced the War on Terror on Sept. 20, 2001, in a speech to Congress. "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaida," he said, "but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated." Spending for the War on Terror includes two major components. First, is spending for Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO). The United States attacked the Taliban for hiding al-Qaida’s leader, Osama bin Laden. The Taliban lost power in December 2001. Hamid Karzai became interim administration head. That same month, ground troops pursued bin Laden into the Afghan foothills. In this article, I explore several of Foucault’s claims in relation to race, biopolitics, and power in order to illuminate some concerns in the wake of the post-9.11.01 political regime of population management. First, what is the relationship between sovereignty and power? Foucault’s writings on the relation between sovereignty and power seem to differ across his writings, such that it is not clear whether he had definitively circumscribed the role of sovereignty in relation to “power.” I lay out an account of what I will call “ontopolitics,” as one that foregrounds the role of sovereign authority in ascribing racial divisions. Foucault challenges the idea that power is wielded by people or groups by way of ‘episodic’ or ‘sovereign’ acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive. ‘Power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’ so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure (Foucault 1998: 63). This is the inspiration for Hayward’s focus on power as boundaries that enable and constrain possibilities for action, and on people’s relative capacities to know and shape these boundaries (Hayward 1998). Foucault is one of the few writers on power who recognise that power is not just a negative, coercive or repressive thing that forces us to do things against our wishes, but can also be a necessary, productive and positive force in society (Gaventa 2003: 2)