

The NT Emergency Response: Foucault, *neoptolemus* and the governmentality of new race/pleasure wars¹

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Abstract

In the ‘Society must be defended’ lectures, Foucault noted that ‘the problem of war’ is linked to the state’s biopolitical power to destroy not only political adversaries, but also ‘the enemy race’ (2003: 257). In this paper we conceptualise the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) as a novel form of racialised combat: a form of *neoptolemus* or ‘new war’. We argue that new configurations of race/pleasure wars reinforce elements of biopower and population management foundationally connected to sovereignty within the western tradition (Foucault 2003; Agamben 1998). We suggest that there is a correlation between new governmentalised bureaucratic regimes of race war and the prurient, sexualised and intensely moralising national public discourse about the NTER. The regimes of legitimisation, violence and racialisation that accompany western sovereignty also inculcate economies of pleasure connected to sex, sexuality and reproduction that are defined and decided upon through a law of continuing racial domination.

¹ This paper provides a distinct but condensed version of arguments that are explored more fully elsewhere. See Tedmanson and Wadiwel (2010).

On 21 June 2007, then Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced a national ‘whole-of-government’ emergency intervention into Indigenous affairs entitled the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), under the rubric of ‘stabilise, normalise, exit’.² This emergency intervention called for ‘special measures’ to be enacted through a raft of amendments to Australia’s *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, which included the deployment of Australia’s armed military into the Northern Territory’s ‘remote areas’ to seize control of some 73 ‘proscribed’ Aboriginal communities and the establishment of what was in effect a form of ‘martial law’ (Dodson 2007; Smith 2007).

Following Foucault’s theorisations on biopolitics and sovereignty, we argue that a particularly distinct and clear thematic of the Northern Territory intervention is population control on the basis of race, in part through governmentality of bodies, sexuality and pleasure. From the outset we state our position that child sexual abuse is abhorrent in any community context. Such serious and violent abuse of power requires appropriate, sustained sensitive and sophisticated social policy and programmatic responses to what is a complex issue endemic in all societies, not we argue an issue for Indigenous communities alone.³

While the intervention was clearly over-coded with the logic of militarism and racialised disciplinarity and included the deliberate and exclusive targeting of Indigenous peoples with restrictive administrative regimes of surveillance, control and financial tutelage, the intervention also inculcated an intricate set of measures that enable precise controls of pleasure, sex, sexuality and reproduction. The governance of ‘pleasure’, in its broadest sense, was a clear aim: for example, forms of pornography (available to citizens elsewhere) were criminalised and confiscated; alcohol was re-prohibited and/or regulated; and social welfare entitlements were quarantined, limiting the capacity of welfare recipients to, for example, purchase tobacco or other personal choice ‘luxuries’, or to gamble. There is a correlation

² When NTER was formally announced by the prime minister it was given the mission to ‘stabilise’, ‘normalise’ and then exit the proscribed communities. The intervention was to be operationalised under the military command of Major General Chalmers, with the guidance of a team of ‘experts’. Military language is evident throughout primary documents regarding the intervention, which refer to, for example, ‘boots on the ground strategy’, ‘command operations’, ‘strategic plans’ and an ‘embedded’ national media presence. A joke circulated in Australia throughout 2007/08 that Australia was the first member nation of US President Bush’s ‘Coalition of the Willing’ to invade itself.

³ We seek to theorise the Foucauldian neo-colonial dimensions of the sovereignty of pleasure in the opportunistic deployment of governmental moral panic generated around the NTER, not in any way to minimise the seriousness of the issues for which Indigenous communities have long sought dignified and appropriate support. We note that several published critical responses have examined the social policy implications and effects of the NTER, including the collection by Altman and Hinkson (2007).

between this governmentalised bureaucratic regime of war with the prurient, sexualised and intensely moralising national public discourse about the intervention. The gaze of the Australian public, reflected in media reporting at the time of the intervention, portrayed Indigenous communities as generically (and by inference ‘genetically’) ‘dysfunctional’ spaces where rampant and out of control bestial sexual transgression was the norm rather than the exception. In this regard, the exceptionality of control devices utilised in the NTER conforms to Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) conception of western sovereignty as drawing its force from exception to normative juridical rule. Sovereignty remains at issue.

We contend that it is possible to identify three main pillars in the analysis of western sovereignty: firstly, sovereignty as an explanation for the phenomena of legitimated authority (that is, the traditional explanation of sovereignty, as designating ordained lines of force that organise the social body); secondly, sovereignty as a form of absolute and self-legitimising violence (as embodied in critiques of legitimised authority, such as Machiavelli, Benjamin, Foucault and Agamben); and finally, sovereignty as a concept inherent in white postcolonial rule that underpins the organising rationality and force of colonisation as a means of white western dominations (that is, western sovereignty as an embodiment of white rule). Leaving these three pillars of sovereignty in place, we propose a fourth pillar of sovereign power: namely sovereignty as a regime of pleasure (and sensation) that organises sex, sexuality and reproduction.

On the face of it, this fourth pillar of sovereignty merely conforms with the biopolitical objectives of sovereign power, as described in the last chapter of Foucault’s *History of sexuality volume 1* (1979). Yet where we would differ from Foucault is that we argue for the importance of looking at pleasure as a fundamental organising aim of sovereignty: the drive for pleasure, that informs sovereign intent and violence, and the investment in a regime that regulates pleasure within a logic of law.

Notions of war, sovereignty, race, pleasure, violence and sexuality are intrinsically linked. In the last of his lectures in the series ‘Society must be defended’, Foucault raised ‘the problem of “war”, seen as a grid for understanding historical processes’ (2003: 239). Foucault developed this conceptualisation of war as linked to the state’s bio-political power to destroy not only political adversaries but ‘the enemy race’ (2003: 257). He suggested ‘the normalizing society is a society in which the norm of discipline and the norm of regulation

intersect along an orthogonal articulation' (2003: 253). Society, organised through the sovereign state, aims to internalise the operations of war, enabling continuing states of warlike domination: the law becomes an expression of a perpetual form of victory.

Freedom in this sense is by no means connected to equality; on the contrary it conveys the opposite sense: in Foucault's words 'freedom is the ability to deprive others of their freedom' (Foucault 2003: 157). 'Essentially the freedom of egoism, of greed – a taste for battle, conquest and plunder ... the freedom of these warriors is not the freedom of tolerance and equality for all; it is the freedom that can be exercised only through domination' (2003: 148). Foucault here suggested in other words that state law guarantees an unending flow of pleasures, laying in place an economy of greed that can only have been secured through the life and death domination of total defeat. In other words, we might consider that the regimes of legitimation, violence and racialisation that accompany western sovereignty also inculcate economies of pleasure connected to sex, sexuality and reproduction that are defined and decided upon through a law of continuing domination.

The sovereign right to pleasure

If, in the first instance, we understand sovereignty as enshrining a regime of pleasure, based upon an imperative for the continuation of a maximal satisfaction for the victorious in war, then the regulation of pleasure must be understood as reparations that find themselves enshrined as the law and norm of sex, sexuality and reproduction. This 'law' is in part that which guarantees continued pleasure and satisfaction for those who dominate. That is, they enable a set of relations that do not detract from the *pleasure of the sovereigns* (captured curiously in the English expression 'at her majesty's pleasure' or 'at the queen's pleasure'). Yet on the other hand, and in a clearly connected sense, the sovereign's pleasure is also an expression for the paranoiac jealousy of the *pleasure of others*: sovereignty cannot be sovereign if the pleasures that are its province of victory are openly shared by others. In this sense, we argue that controls of pleasure are both an expression of the primary sovereign right to a pleasure of continuing victory, and by extension a right to preclude and manipulate the pleasure experienced by others. Where Foucault describes biopolitical sovereignty as a right both to foster life and to diminish it to the point of death, we argue that this might also be understood as a right to pleasure and a simultaneous right to make suffer.

This sovereign right to pleasure necessarily interacts with the other pillars of sovereignty that we have described. Of course, as we have discussed there is a clear connection to the biopolitical arm of sovereignty, through the biological regulation of bodies and population. There is further a connection to sovereignty as a means of legitimised force, since we would argue that wielding sovereign force becomes in this regime not a chore that must be grudgingly attended to, but a pure pleasure.

While in the 2007 NTER the specific violence of war against Aboriginal peoples is not enacted to the point of death, the sovereignty at play is based on military intervention; an occupying force enacts what we argue is a ‘new war’, a *neoptolemus*, carefully constructed around the annihilation of ‘race’ and the control, denial and appropriation of ‘pleasure’. Based in a deep ‘moral panic’ about the savagery of ‘others’, a tension is exposed between envy and disgust that oscillates from the lust for the power to control Indigenous ‘others’ and the desire to ‘take care’ of the perceived vulnerable by regulating and containing sexual and other ‘pleasures’, itself a perversely gratifying experience for the dominant.

Thus, we argue, the NTER intervention reveals a new form of war and one imbued with the sovereignty of pleasure. Indigenous academic Langton suggests that:

the everyday suffering of Aboriginal children and women, the men who assault and abuse them, and the use of this suffering as a kind of visual and intellectual pornography in Australian media and public debates. The very public debate about child abuse is like Baudrillard’s ‘war porn’. It has parodied the horrible suffering of Aboriginal people. The crisis in Aboriginal society is now a public spectacle, played out in a vast ‘reality show’ through the media, parliaments, public service and the Aboriginal world. This obscene and pornographic spectacle shifts attention away from everyday lived crisis that many Aboriginal people endure – or do not, dying as they do at excessive rates. (2007: 1)

Langton suggests the NTER represents a kind of ‘climax’ for non-Indigenous Australia’s prurient interest in Indigenous life. We argue that elements of the NTER *neoptolemus* reveal the voyeuristic, opportunistic and perverse derivation of excitement that flows from violence and the governance of pleasure and that this in turn forms a fundamental organising aim of

sovereignty: that the drive for pleasure informs sovereign intent and violence and underpins the investment in a regime that regulates pleasure within a logic of law. The terms 'sexual' and 'abuse' are semiotically charged in the polity of colonial relations. As Puar (2005) reminds us, postcolonial scholarship reveals that the sexual is always a key part of colonial domination, empire and nation building and all conquest is innately corporeal.

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