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## THE ENCOUNTER OF PSYCHIATRY AND RACISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MICHEL FOUCAULT

**Abstract:** The subject of this article is the encounter of race, racism, and psychiatry in the philosophy discourse of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Although he is admired for development of the concept of power relations, and nontraditional approach to history and philosophy, in this article focus will be on Foucault as an intellectual who was also trained and had affinity in psychology and psychiatry. In this respect, the novelty of his approach to historical roots of psychiatry and its social importance in modern times will be accessed, as well as relations between racism and psychiatry. With this article, Foucault will be presented not only as a philosopher of anti-psychiatry, but also as a representative of critical discourse of power that psychiatry has on racism and modern society. In that respect, his discourse on relations between race and psychiatry will be accessed as suitable for application in humanities, social and medical sciences.

**Keywords MeSH:** racism, psychiatry, mental disorder

**Non-MeSH:** Foucault, race, abnormal, internal racism

### **Background: Foucault and medical history**

French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was widely admired for his innovative approach to concept and technology of power, and for inclusion of nontraditional methodology of research about historical and social topics. However, Foucault cherished for all his intellectual carrier strong affinity and interest in psychology, psychiatry, and a wide range of topics around the mental health and disorders. His first encounter with mental institution in person was after traumatic attempt of suicide in 1948, when father sent him at the Sainte-Anne Hospital Center in the 14th arrondissement in Paris. Whether this renowned institution with long history from 1651 or experience of therapy and philosophical brainstorming about it and similar topics inspired him, it is still unconfirmed. However, Foucault soon received diplomas in that

field which is often neglected information. Namely, beside philosophy, Foucault holding bachelor's degree in psychology (1949), and diploma in psychopathology (1952) received at the Institute of psychology which was part of the university now known as Paris Descartes University.

Then, history of mental health was subject of his state doctorate thesis entitled *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* from 1960 at the *École normale supérieure* in Paris, or in French category *thèse principale*. Translated in English as *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* [1], Foucault's doctorate became one of his most popular studies, which is widely introduced in the humanities curricula of numerous disciplines and courses. Next important Foucault's research focused on medical history was rounded in a book in 1963 - *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception (Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical)* [2], and this time primary focus was on the history of hospital as institution. Finally, in the tenth chapter of his most popular study from structuralist phase, *Order of Things (Les Mots et les choses, 1966)* [3], Foucault thoroughly analyzed position and disciplinary relations between ethnology and psychoanalysis, as well as their virtues and restrictions as a part of the "human sciences" [3 p407-420]

If we conclude that interest in psychiatry, and similar topics such as psychoanalysis, mental disorders, medical institutions etc. was permanent for Foucault, the interdisciplinarity, the types of sources he used for interpretation and finally, the target group towards which he directed his writings changed. In this regard, the *Madness and Civilization* [1] did not immediately arouse the attention of philosophers, but rather historians and art historians, since in this study Foucault demonstrated his superior knowledge of art by depicting madness in art works, and through a careful selection of examples.

The research passion for distant historical periods and the fact that he was lecturer at the Collège de France, who nurtured an atypical attitude towards teaching and gave the professors the freedom to create lectures at their discretion, but with the imperative to be innovative, contributed that Foucault established his philosophy practice and discourse as "the history of ideas"; therefore, primarily as a philosophical strategy of reflection that does not pretend to interpret contemporary social problems, and therefore does not necessarily offer empirically based thought. In this regard, although Foucault's discourse experienced not only an extremely large number of analyses and quotation but was also applied to the most diverse fields of science, with his concepts of power, apparatus (*dispositif*), knowledge-power relations, "biopower" and the like.

Still, medical history scholars rarely accept his interpretation. When we add that his affinity for interpretation of mental disorder in historical perspective primarily belongs to humanities discipline, then it becomes understandable why his psychiatry discourse is being neglected and still needs to be promoted and analyzed to become a part of the mainstream history of psychiatry. In line with that, we will follow his interpretation of psychiatry in relation to race and racism which we found important or interesting for social scientists as well for the medical historians.

## Race and Psychiatry

Foucault's interpretation of the issues of race and racism were developed in extensive historical perspective starting from the Middle Ages, through early modern history until the era of Nazism as a culmination. In this respect, Foucault inaugurated two new concepts, "race wars" and "state racism" in the lectures *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France from 1976* [4]. He dealt with these topics especially in the third and fourth lectures, from the 21 and 28 January 1976, in the sections "The discourse of race struggle and its transcriptions", "The counter history of race struggle", and in "Race purity and state racism: the Nazi transformations and the Soviet transformations". [4 p43-86]. Finally, in lecturing about race Foucault was especially focused on the period of the 19th century when, according to a series of criteria he singled out in his observation that there was an intensification of the issue of race.

In contrast to these lectures and the two-fold interpretation of racism on a macro level of approach, which other researchers have observed so far [5, 6, 7], it seemed significant to point out Foucault's even earlier interest in the topic of race and its relations with mental illness and psychiatry. Namely, Foucault developed these relations in his lectures *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*. [8] These lectures and the approach to the relations between psychiatry and race can also be considered extremely significant both for the history of racism and for the development of Foucault's explanation of psychiatry's role in the society. Therefore, we will devote attention to those relations in the next section of this paper.

### Abnormal: 'Internal' and 'Psychiatric' Racism

Eleven lectures held by Michel Foucault at the *Collège de France* from January to March 19 in 1975 were focused on the concept of the socially "abnormal" in the history of the modern West. [8] In this respect, he dealt with the emergence of psychiatry as a technology of the "abnormal", and he rounded off the lectures by summarizing the key elements of constructing psychiatry in the second half of the 19th century. [8 p308-322]

In contrast to his later methodological developments and the choice of primarily historical sources as material for interpretation, Foucault only in these lectures used an exceptional corpus of contemporary medical documents. This original medical documents about the treatment of patients were created from 1954 to 1973 and originated in the French psychiatric institutions. He then cross-referenced the mentioned contemporary documents with older historical documents, as well as nineteenth-century scientific periodicals and leading medical literature about chosen topic. He used all these sources in comparison to deepen the interpretation of the connection between the technology of the "abnormal" and the development of institutions for the stationing of the "abnormal". In addition, for the development of the technology of the "abnormal", he considered the evolution of accompanying therapies for the suppression of "abnormality" to be significant. As a key accompanying "preventive" (or to be precise, suppressive) therapies of "abnormal" he singled out eugenics and psychoanalysis. [8 p317] According to Foucault, eugenics and psychoanalysis "saved" psychiatry for a while from the search for medication. [8 p317] Namely, both advocated hospital-

ization with sterilization of the “abnormal” in terms of eugenics, and the technique of talking with the patient by psychoanalysis. In line with that, therapy was conducted as replacement and/or surgical change of the body, or discussion with therapist.

It should not be considered a coincidence that he rounded off the entire cycle of lectures with a topic – “Psychiatry and racism: psychiatry and social protection”. [8 p308-317] Thematically in these lectures, he followed up on previous research and the publication *Psychiatric power: Lectures at the College de France 1973-1974 (Pouvoir psychiatrique)*. [9] In that section, Foucault defined the role of psychiatry in the second half of the 19th century to “protect society from being the victim of the definitive dangers represented by people in an abnormal condition”. [8 p316] In that passage, Foucault emphasized that psychiatry, as a young science, was given its main role as protector of society and order. He also pointed out that with the emergence of the theory of degeneration, the development of biology and evolutionary theory, and the intense insistence on the analysis of hereditary factors, psychiatry will significantly influence the development of a special type of racism, which in his opinion was:

“A racism that was very different in this period from what could be called traditional, historical racism, from ‘ethnic racism’. The racism that psychiatry gave birth to in this period is racism against the abnormal, against individuals who, as carriers of a condition, a stigmata, or any defect whatsoever, may more or less randomly transmit to their heirs the unpredictable consequences of the evil, or rather of the non-normal, that they carry within them. It is a racism, therefore, whose function is not so much the prejudice or defense of one group against another as the detection of all those within a group who may be the carriers of a danger to it. It is an internal racism that permits the screening of every individual within a given society.” [8 p316-317]

As a part of the lectures, he spoke for the first time about the issue of “racial cleansing” in the context of evolutionary theory and eugenics. However, it is important to point out that here racism is placed in the context of micro social relations and disruption or/and danger to society, which was opposed to traditional racist divisions at the level of binary relations of social (ethnic) groups. In addition, Foucault’s interpretation at this point deserves special attention since he noticed that direct relations between the treatment of “race” and the technology of the “abnormal” are established, i.e. emphasizing the “abnormal” as physical differences (and not ethnic or cultural difference) as carriers of certain congenital diseases, and like that a kind of threat to society and thus those who had to be excluded out of society. For example, he observed the Italian pioneer of criminal discourse with elements of eugenics, Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), who analyzed the phenomenon of “degeneration” as synthesis of mental and physical health. Therefore, according to his analysis from forty French anarchists, 31% having serious physical defects, or from the hundred arrested anarchists in Turin thirty-four “lacked harmoniously wonderful figures”. [8 p153]

Foucault concludes that soon after its creation, psychiatry stopped pretending to have a therapeutic function, and served to preserve and protect society from contact with the “abnormal”. [8 p316] In this regard, based on empirical material, Foucault placed racism in microsocial relations and relations of animosity according to the principle of normal-abnormal, against the usual conflict of different social groups

or within the group according to the principle of foreign to a certain race. At the same time, he emphasized racism and its “desirable” role in social protection, thereby pointing out an important and often silenced attitude about how much racism was constructed as a socially and politically correct concept that was the primary preventive tool in modern societies.

In addition, a careful reading of this study by Foucault leads to a conclusion that at the end of the 19th century, a racially different individual was no longer just “foreign” and “different”, and a reflection of colonial or traditional anti-Semitic antipathy. Such an individual is (was) also considered “abnormal”, that is, or sick with congenital deformities or some other “strangeness” that differentiate him from the dominant social ethnic group. It can be assumed that Foucault is referring here to ‘peculiarities’, i.e. ‘foreignness’ attributed by the dominant ethnic group in the encounter with the minorities. Also, Foucault focuses on the position of the “abnormal”, that is, on how “abnormal” individual is treated in society (“internal racism”) and specifically in psychiatry (“psychiatric racism”). It is important for this claim that Foucault pointed out in several places how much the concept of “abnormal” was dispersed in the 19th century to different groups, and pointed out that this was the period when, among other things, homosexuals were also medically considered “abnormal”, as well as other deviant groups such as criminals. In this respect, we need to read about Foucault’s interpretation of Lombroso’s criminal deviation discourse.

Bearing in mind Foucault’s tendency to constantly lead the interpretation of the influence of micro on the macro level of social phenomena, it can be concluded that, on the one hand, “psychiatric racism” would imply a kind of institutionalization and the establishment of a knowledge-power-practice connection. On the other hand, the “internal racism”, which is a blurry concept in micro social positioning of the actor and has a local and more subjective meaning in accordance with the social group and with the context in which the “abnormal” individual manifests itself.

To sum up, according to Foucault, racially “abnormal” actors are social constructions. Thus, reading Foucault, racial abnormality arises under the influence of evolutionary theory on the general social preoccupation with hereditary factors. “Racial abnormality” then develops through eugenics, which then influenced the emergence in society of the desire to preserve the “purity” of man and social protection in the 19th century. Simultaneously with the establishment of psychiatry as a “technology of the abnormal”, according to Foucault, it will necessarily deal with the discursive and practical support of racism in the service of social prevention.

Already in this passage, Foucault unequivocally concludes that the appearance of “internal racism” in the first decades of the 20th century is intertwined with traditional European racism, which was primarily “anti-Semitism” and culminated in Nazism and the Third Reich [8 p317] Then, according to Foucault, in this totalitarian society, all forms of medicine were imbued primarily with racism. Therefore, with primary attention, the Nazis approached the types of preventing the penetration of the “abnormal” and its violation of the “purity of the race”. In this sense, the philosopher who dealt with Foucault’s racist discourse applied to the period of Nazism, Chloë Tay-

lor, not only noted that in Nazism there was a permeation of internal and ethnic racism, but also gives an example to confirm this:

“So, for instance, the Nazis will manifest an ‘ethnic racism’ in their murder of Jews, but will also apply an internal racism to Aryans who are deemed a genetic danger to the race.” [10 p749]

Taylor evidently points to the Nazis’ use of eugenics and sterilization as extreme forms of “internal racism”. However, when we return to Foucault, it seems to be even more important that in these lectures, although he focused primarily on the 19th century, he explicitly pointed out that the development path of racism is to a significant extent not only fundamentally linked to the European institutionalization of psychiatry, but also and with political-ideological parameters. [8] In this sense, Foucault observes the developmental path of “internal” and “psychiatric racism” against the abnormal from the 19th century to the first decades of the 20th century in Germany:

“We should not be surprised that German psychiatry functioned so spontaneously with Nazism. The new racism specific to the twentieth century, this neoracism as the internal means of defense of a society against its abnormal individuals, is the child of psychiatry, and Nazism did no more than graft this new racism onto the ethnic racism that was endemic in the nineteenth century. I think, then, that these new forms of racism, which took hold in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, should be linked historically to psychiatry. Nevertheless, it is clear that although it gave rise to this eugenics, psychiatry is far from being reducible to this form of racism, which covered or took over only a relatively limited part of it. However, even when psychiatry has got rid of this racism or when it did not activate these forms of racism, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, it nonetheless always essentially functioned as a mechanism and body of social defense.” [8 p317]

If, on the other hand, we stay in the field of psychiatry, it is interesting that a significant line in the studies of racism in France and its colonies, inaugurated at the time of Foucault’s beginning of writing, deals with relations with the psychological experience of victims and the intensity of heterophobia, which becomes the main parameter in sociological analysis of racism.<sup>1</sup> However, bearing in mind the beginnings of psychological racism which Foucault mentioned too, we should also observed one prominent intellectual dedicated to topic of racism in the relation with psychology. Namely, French psychoanalyst and social philosopher Frantz Fanon (1925-1961),<sup>2</sup> was known for his writings about phenomenological experience of colonial peoples. Foucault, on

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most prominent contemporary scholars of racism, French philosopher Pierre-André Taguieff (1946) emphasizes heterophobia-heterophilia as one of the three most important concepts for the development of racism from the seventies to today. The other two pairs are race-ethnicity/culture and inequality-difference [11 p4]

<sup>2</sup> Fanon was a native of Martinique, and he was the head of a psychiatric clinic in the Algerian city of Blida and a member of the National Front for the Independence of Algeria. He left a deepened theoretical view of racism as a phenomenological experience Black skin, white masks (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952), and he also gave answers to identity battles in North Africa, then questions of a peaceful or revolutionary vision of solving French colonialism in his writings *A Dying Colonialism* (*L’An V de la Révolution Algérienne*, 1959) and *The Wretched on Earth* (*Les Damnés de la terre*, 1961).

the other hand, although he followed the development of psychiatry and the “abnormal”, and emphasized the importance of monitoring the individual, he was not interested in the psychological experience of the colonial threads (colonizers) of other nations, but his micro analysis was constantly reflected in a macro perspective - as “internal racism” affects society and how it protects itself from it.

### Conclusion

Summarizing research results presented by Foucault in the *Abnormal* lectures, from a wider context of social sciences and humanities, it should be concluded that his use of the term “race” does not coincide with traditional interpretations. Foucault in *Abnormal* lectures not opposing different social groups according to the principle of “race”, but “race” in these lectures were identified with the complex concept of “abnormal”. In line with that, racism becomes one of the technologies for understanding that the concept of mental disorder is socially constructed too. To add to this construction that it happened in a certain historical period, and in a connection with the development of medicine, i.e. psychiatry. Finally, if we approach to his discourse on race and psychiatry through all corpus of his writings, the important novelty is his micro-macro level of analysis of racism: race wars and struggles on a collective level, and “internal” and “psychiatric” racism on the level of social interaction.

His strong critical approach to establishment and early development of psychiatry prompted several scholars to define him as a pioneer of anti-psychiatry discourse. For example, the *Birth of Clinic* [2] as well as his later lectures at the Collège de France from the 1970s, in which he touched on the history of psychiatry or precisely the “abnormal” [8, 9], are considered to belong or influenced the anti-psychiatry discourse. [12] From contemporary perspective, critical assessment on the history of every discipline is welcome in science. Or to rephrase, it was difficult to achieve any step to progress without critical points that contributed to improvement of certain scientific or field of medical practice, and status of medical practitioners and workers self-awareness too.

Further development and application of this innovative interpretative strategy of insisting on Michel Foucault’s social constructivism of racism can be achieved in a series of examples. Let’s just mention the connection with the racial doctrine of the National Socialists, which is precisely a socially constructed phenomenon with the (attributed) criteria of “racially abnormal” Jews from whom the German Aryan society needs to be “cleansed”. In this respect, Foucault observations could be suitable to Holocaust studies and biopolitics which is also his innovation. Beside scholars and lecturers from the humanities and social sciences, further steps of applying Foucault’s concepts of racism in the field of psychiatry are still ongoing. Until now, the most important step in application of “internal racism” in psychoanalysis is led by British psychologist from London Clinic of Psychoanalysis Dr Fakhry Davids in his book from 2011 *Internal Racism: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Race and Difference*. [13]

## Rezime

Predmet ovog rada je susret rase, rasizma i psihijatrije u filozofskom diskursu francuskog filozofa Mišela Fukoa (Michel Foucault). Iako je uvažavan zbog razvoja koncepta relacija moći i netradicionalnog pristupa istoriji i filozofiji, focus ovog rada je u ovom radu se fokusiramo na Fukoa kao intelektualca koji se ne samo da se školovao i u oblasti psihologije i psihijatrije, već je tokom čitave karijere gajio afinitet prema datim disciplinama kao inspiraciji za svoja teorijska promišljanja. U tom smislu, u radu se razmatraju njegov inovativni pristup istorijskim korenima psihijatrije i pitanju njenog značaja za društvo, kao i odnosima između rasizma i psihijatrije. Prateći Fukoovo interesovanje za pitanja iz oblasti istorije medicine, kao što su istorija medicinskih institucija ili psihoanalize i drugih tipova terapije, u ovom radu se posebno izdvaja njegov pristup vezama eugenike i psihijatrije u konstruisanju društvenog fenomena – “nenormalnog”. S tim u vezi, u radu su posebno analizirana Fukoova predavanja na Kolež de Fransu iz 1974/5 publikovana pod nazivom “Nenormalni”. Osim analize konkretnih napisa Mišela Fukoa, u ovom radu se nastoji ukazati na mogućnosti dalje primene njegovog rasnog psihijatrijskog diskursa, odnosno kritički se pristupa smeštanju Fukoa kao pionira anti-psihijatrije. Fukou se pristupa u široj perspektivi tumačenja njegovih koncepta, te se smatra predstavnikom kritičkog diskursa moći koju psihijatrija ima od svog uspostavljanja u XIX veku, te njenoj vezi sa rasizmom, kao i značaju za tadašnje moderno društvo. U tom smislu, njegov će se diskurs o odnosima između rase i psihijatrije u kome se spajaju i mikro i makro perspektiva analize društva, razmatrati u svetlu pogodnosti primene kako u humanističkim, tako društvenim i medicinskim naukama.

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