

RESEARCH ARTICLE

On struggle as experiment: Foucault in dialogue with Indigenous and decolonial movement intellectuals, for a new approach to theory

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Abstract

If critical thought is to contribute to liberatory struggle, it arguably requires a general, even structural, theorisation of the nature and sources of power and oppression. This appears to be at odds with the critical project of questioning the immanence of truth to power, as famously framed by Michel Foucault. Yet Foucault's philosophical project in fact hinged upon his own attempts to grapple with this tension. What is more, his ultimate failure to resolve it led to ambiguities that might be considered generative (especially in light of increased rapprochement between Foucauldian, Marxian, and decolonial International Relations [IR]). Reading Indigenous and decolonial movement intellectuals in tandem with Foucault, alongside the philosophy of science of one of his major influences – Gaston Bachelard – we advocate attentiveness to the 'experimental' way in which struggles against capitalist extraction and (neo)colonialism hold together dissonant theoretical – and ontological – commitments when putting forward structural accounts of power. This leads us to an ethos of inquiry that starts from lived thought, as well as to a non-linear approach to the relations between method, theory, and associated ontological commitments, from which scholars are traditionally trained away in social science.

Keywords: decolonial; Foucault; Indigenous; ontology; struggle; theory

Introduction

It is (or should be) a truism that any collective transformational struggle must have some diagnosis of the broader relations and systems of power that it confronts. Resistance movements and critical scholarship seeking to contribute (directly or indirectly) to liberatory struggle must have a grasp of the nature and sources of power and violence in the world, as well as how those relations of power and violence constrain emancipatory horizons. We must, in other words, have theoretical coordinates for making sense of the wider structures¹ in which exploitation, oppression, extraction, and dispossession take shape. Yet any attempt to offer such coordinates must also confront the problem that no attempt to understand power can exist outside of the very relations of power that it seeks to theorise. All critical thinkers must confront the historical contingency – and potential violence – of their own terms of reference.

¹We use the term 'structures' here in a loose, generic sense, to describe systems of power that have become sedimented and rigid at least to a certain extent, over and above the direct control of individuals, and which can be theorised and described by terms such as 'capitalism', 'colonialism', 'patriarchy', and so forth. We are aware that definitions of how these structures work and whether these terms are adequate to describe them are subject to specific theoretical definitions and controversy.

This is an old problem for historicist social science. Many on the Marxist Left have grappled with it although, in International Relations (IR) scholarship, the primary philosophical underpinning for claims about the mutually constitutive relationship between truth and power is, arguably, Michel Foucault.² Indeed, Foucault is widely celebrated for his opposition to structural theorisations of power and associated global understandings of history.³ ‘What historical knowledge is possible’, Foucault famously asked, ‘of a history that itself produces the true/false distinction on which such knowledge depends?’⁴ Yet this stood in tension with his own desire to address ‘questions of general import in their historically unique form.’⁵ How do we identify ‘questions of general import’, while still maintaining a critical disposition towards our own terms of reference as the product of histories of power and violence? Decolonial and anti-colonial thought and praxis only raise the stakes of this question. On the one hand, it is vital to have an understanding of modern/colonial world history and of the general workings of capitalist extraction: as Sylvia Wynter has emphasised, the need to theorise totality emerges from the experience of oppression and dispossession.⁶ Without an understanding of totality, it is difficult to establish a sense of what those in struggle are up against. On the other hand, however, it is necessary to recognise that such theorisations often reproduce concepts of temporality, nature, and humanity that have served to rationalise the dehumanisation and enslavement of colonised peoples, constituting them as available for exploitation and expropriation.⁷

In this article, we bring a fresh perspective to the problem of how to mediate between ‘questions of general import’ and the immanence of knowledge to systems of power, bringing Foucault’s own mode of historicism into dialogue with the thought of Indigenous and decolonial movement intellectuals engaged in struggle against the violences of capitalism and (neo)colonialism. By considering how Foucault as a philosopher grappled with the question of the general and the historically contingent and setting this alongside how questions of global capitalism, colonialism, and systemic racism are theorised in struggle, we plot an approach to theory that holds together dissonance and historicity, but without ending up in mere affirmation of contingency and ambiguity. This approach we call ‘thinking through struggle’. At its heart is the idea that we can think of struggle through the lens of the ‘experiment’, as conceptualised in the philosophy of science of Gaston Bachelard – a thinker within the same tradition as Foucault. Bachelard, like Foucault, insisted upon the inseparability of subject and object and the immanence of ‘truth’ to our interactions with the world. Nevertheless, he gave a particular weight to theory – a sense of reality ‘in its completeness’ – as necessary for setting up an experiment. Putting this in conversation with Indigenous and decolonial intellectuals and the engagement of one of us with peasant and Indigenous struggles in Colombia, we suggest that the role of theory in struggle not only can be understood in an analogous way but also has important implications for how we think of method in critical social science. Thinking through the ‘experiment’ of struggle, we argue, implies an ethos of inquiry, approaching inquiry in which the relationship between method, theory, and concrete research problems is

²Notwithstanding how Marxism is sometimes caricatured, many Marxists have emphasised the need to historicise concepts, categories, and underlying ontological assumptions. While some have insisted that historical materialism provides a framework able to sustain anti-capitalist thought without falling prey to fixed ontological assumptions, it is difficult to evade the performative contradiction ‘according to which all philosophical ideas and concepts change over time – except those that adequately express this insight’. Carsten Strathausen, ‘Introduction: Thinking outside in’, in Carsten Strathausen (ed.), *Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. xix–xlvi (p. xxi).

³See e.g. Michel Foucault, ‘What is enlightenment?’, in Sylvère Lotringer (ed.), *The Politics of Truth*, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997 [1984]), pp. 97–119.

⁴Michel Foucault, ‘Questions of method’, in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984* (London: Penguin, 1994 [1978]), pp. 223–238 (p. 233).

⁵Foucault, ‘Enlightenment’, p. 188.

⁶Sylvia Wynter, in David Scott, ‘The re-enchantment of humanism: An interview with Sylvia Wynter’, *Small Axe*, 8 (2000), pp. 119–207 (p. 188).

⁷E.g. Sylvia Wynter, ‘Contesting the colonality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation: An argument’, *The New Centennial Review*, 3:3 (2003), pp. 257–337; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, ‘On the colonality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept’, *Cultural Studies*, 21:2–3 (2007), pp. 240–70.

addressed in an open-ended manner, one that is attentive both to the historicity of concepts and for the need to make more general claims.

Questions about how we understand the forces and structures of power in the world are (implicitly) questions of ontology – at least in the sense of social or political ontology.⁸ Moreover, the increased influence of decolonial and Indigenous thought (as well as post-humanist approaches) within the academy has led to emphasis on questions of ontology in a deeper sense, implying direct attention to ‘fundamental aspects of human existence’, which are inseparable from questions of both ethics and politics,⁹ as well as to the nature of the more-than-human world in which the human merely constitutes one element among others.¹⁰ Indeed, thinkers within these traditions have brought forcefully into view how prevailing understandings of the human subject as separate from an objectified world have been shaped by colonial power and violence.¹¹

Foucault was also deeply critical of the ideas of a human subject separate from an objective world. Indeed, his own radical historicism is often interpreted as insistence on the historical nature of all ontological claims.¹² Nevertheless, this is only one side of the story, prevailing in the social sciences in part because Foucault tends to be engaged with as the purveyor of specific concepts and methods, rather than as a philosopher. Indeed, his philosophical ambition, as Béatrice Han notes, is ‘commonly masked by the reception and use of his writings by the social sciences.’¹³ Foucault’s philosophical project did not only produce an emphasis upon stepping back and questioning ‘truth’, but also a constant vacillation between radical historicisation and general, one could even say ontological, claims, or between the transcendental and the historical,¹⁴ between ‘a form of objectivity’ and ‘a Nietzschean insistence on the interminability of interpretation,’¹⁵ between ‘finitude and infinitude.’¹⁶ By proposing that thinking with Foucault as philosopher is generative, we do not deny that Foucault himself deployed European, Enlightenment sources to ‘police’ how critical inquiry in general should proceed.¹⁷ It is certainly not our intention to advocate a ‘Foucauldian’ approach to the problem, any more than we seek to mount an argument against Foucault. Rather,

⁸For a useful discussion and definition, see Colin Hay, ‘Political ontology’, in Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 78–96.

⁹Nathan Widder, *Political Theory after Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2012), p. 1. See also William E. Connolly, ‘Foreword: The left and ontopolitics’, in Carsten Strathausen (ed.), *Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. ix–xvii.

¹⁰See e.g. Maldonado-Torres, ‘Coloniality of being’; Sarah Hunt, ‘Ontologies of Indigeneity: The politics of a concept’, *Cultural Geographies*, 21:1 (2013), pp. 27–32; Zoe Todd, ‘An Indigenous feminist’s take on the ontological turn: “Ontology” is just another word for colonialism’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 29:1 (2016), pp. 4–22; Mark Jackson (ed.), *Coloniality, Ontology, and the Question of the Posthuman* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018). For discussion of the slightly different renderings of the term ‘ontology’ in philosophy and social science, see, *inter alia*, Connolly, ‘Foreword’; David Graeber, ‘Radical alterity is just another word for saying “reality”: A reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5:2 (2015), p. 15; Strathausen, ‘Introduction: Thinking outside in’.

¹¹See, *inter alia*, Doerthe Rosenow, *Unmaking Environmental Activism: Beyond Modern/Colonial Binaries in the GMO Controversy* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 3; Lara Montesinos Coleman, ‘Marxism, coloniality and ontological assumptions’, *International Relations*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 166–72. For further explanation of the necessary relationship between theorisation and ontological assumptions, see William E. Connolly, ‘The irony of interpretation’, in Daniel W. Conway and John E. Seery (eds), *The Politics of Irony: Essays in Self-Betrayal* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), pp. 120–50; ‘Identity and difference in global politics’, in James Der Derian and Michael J. Shapiro (eds), *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (New York: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 323–42.

¹²Cf. Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹³Béatrice Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical* [Original title: *L’Ontologie manquée de Michel Foucault: Entre l’Historique et le Transcendental*], trans. Edward Pile (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1998]), p. 5.

¹⁴Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project*.

¹⁵Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 234.

¹⁶Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 122.

¹⁷Robbie Shilliam, ‘Decolonising the grounds of ethical inquiry: A dialogue between Kant, Foucault and Glissant’, *Millennium*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 649–665 (p. 656).

what we suggest is that the vacillation around the question of ontology, often considered the greatest weakness of Foucault's project, might be considered a strength that can point us in new directions when considered in dialogue with lived tensions between dissonant ontologies visible in decolonial, anti-capitalist, and Indigenous struggle and associated structural theorisations of power.

In the next section, we trace the tension at the heart of Foucault's philosophical project and consider its consequences for the uptake of Foucault in IR – including more recent studies that have attempted to combine a Foucauldian sense of contingency and discontinuity with critique of a modern/colonial matrix of power or modern/colonial world history. We then approach this tension from another direction, considering how some Indigenous and decolonial scholars make sense of the interplay between general claims, ontological dissonance, and the associated critical stance towards 'truth' that is often demanded by struggle against the violences of capitalism and (neo)colonialism. Building on this, we present our own account of struggle as 'experiment' by returning to the French epistemological tradition within which Foucault was situated, putting Bachelard's conceptualisation of the experiment into conversation with the long-term engagement of one of us with peasant and Indigenous struggles in Colombia. We then offer final reflections on the implications of this approach for theory and method in scholarship seeking to provide an account of structural forces, with all the ontological investment this implies, while maintaining a commitment to heterogeneity, contingency, and dissonance.

Foucault, historicism, and ontological assumptions

Foucault's project cut into an intellectual landscape dominated by debates on Marxism, science, and ideology.¹⁸ In social science, it is well recognised that Foucault wanted to escape ready-made accounts of power in terms of capitalist structures. It is likewise well known that Foucault rejected notions of ideology as epiphenomenal to material social relations, alongside the humanism then permeating French Marxism. For Foucault, the idea that we can overcome false consciousness or discover our fundamental essence embodied a historically situated form of reason that failed to grasp how we are constituted as subjects within relations of power/knowledge.¹⁹ It would, however, be a mistake to pitch Foucault against a generic 'Marxism'. While Foucault was deeply critical of specific theoretical commitments within the Marxism of his milieu, his project should be understood, at a deeper level, as an attempt to avoid both 'philosophies of the object' (which embraced a naive empiricism that took for granted the existence of objects outside of the mind) and 'philosophies of the subject' (i.e. phenomenological approaches, which deduced the world's real objects from the subject's capacity to experience them in a unified and conscious manner).²⁰ To define truth in relation to the experience of subjects was just as erroneous as positing a ready-made material world of objects about which we can tell the truth.²¹

In early work, Foucault developed 'archaeology' as an approach contrasted explicitly to a 'total' or 'global' historiography that 'assumes a spatio-temporal continuity between all phenomena, and a certain homogeneity between them'.²² This does not mean that Foucault discarded historical analysis. Rather, he presented his approach as part of an epistemic shift – beginning with Marx – towards 'general' history, which, despite its name, does not seek general principles of coherence but addresses dispersion and discontinuity.²³ Thus, Foucault set out to unearth the conditions of

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, 'Interview with Michel Foucault', in James D. Faubion (ed.), *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984* (London: Penguin, 1994 [1978]), pp. 239–297 (p. 259).

¹⁹ Foucault, 'Interview', pp. 251, 273–5.

²⁰ Cf. David Hyder, 'Foucault, Cavailles, and Husserl on the historical epistemology of the sciences', *Perspectives on Science*, 11:1 (2003), pp. 108–9.

²¹ Peter Hallward, 'Introduction: Theoretical training', in Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (eds), *Concept and Form*, Volume 1: *Key texts from the Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 1–14 (p. 6).

²² Young, *White Mythologies*, p. 114.

²³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002 [1969]), pp. 8–16.

possibility for knowledge in a general way, while still holding firm to the historically specific nature of those conditions, by delineating epistemes and their 'rules of formation' through studies of discourses.²⁴ Contemporaries in France's Cercle d'Épistémologie leapt onto the paradox here: how can we capture what makes knowledge possible for a whole *époque* from a position immanent to one particular episteme?²⁵ In the absence of a total history, or an experience of the subject constitutive of the world, what is the principle of coherence of an episteme, or the determining force of its historical transformation?²⁶ What is more, despite his attention to the conditions of emergence of the subject as the basis of knowledge, Foucault does in the process offer a general account of humanity in its finitude, shaped by contingent historical time. This, as Sébastien Malette argues, is in effect an (ahistorical) ontology, which 'combines Kant's attempt to ground our knowledge on the basis of human finitude, while rejecting the transcendentalism of such finitude on the basis of its historical condition.'²⁷

Foucault never addressed these issues, insisting instead that his method was purely descriptive.²⁸ He subsequently restaged the question of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge as a political matter, focusing on the entanglements between power and 'regimes of truth.'²⁹ This turn to 'genealogy', Robert J. C. Young writes, 'develops the possibility broached in the *Archeology* that in a general history different significances can be accorded to events depending on "their correlation with other previous or simultaneous events, discursive or not"'.³⁰ Foucault's route into 'questions of general import' is that it is the intellectual who, by posing a problem, sets up a generality against which events can be constituted and arranged within a series or within a temporality.³¹ As Gary Gutting notes, Foucault's own identification of such questions emerged from his own experiences.³² Despite this, however, Foucault derives an account of the relationship between power and truth that cuts across different social and political domains from an analysis specifically focused on the human sciences.³³ 'Power-knowledge relations' are, Han underscores, a general feature of history, in a way that sometimes 'seems to reactivate the type of Hegelian schema so disliked by Foucault'. At times, the power-knowledge nexus is no longer 'a contingent and historically given configuration', but a 'metaphysical entity, endowed with a quasi-transcendental function'.³⁴

This understanding of the circular relations between truth and power underpins Foucault's approach to critique. Foucault's subject too is immanent to these relations, 'tied to its own identity by its conscience or self-knowledge'.³⁵ Indeed, in Foucault's later work, the ontology that Malette suggests characterises his oeuvre reaches a peak, with an account of the individual capable of constituting and recognising themselves as a subject and able, if not to detach completely from dominant modes of subjection, then at least to rearrange the pieces and play the 'games of truth'

²⁴Foucault, *Archeology*, p. 142.

²⁵Knox Peden, 'Foucault and the subject of method', in Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (eds), *Concept and Form*, Volume 2: *Interviews and essays on the Cahiers pour l'Analyse* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 73–9.

²⁶Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*, p. 3; cf. Hubert L. Dreyfuss and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Brighton: The Harvester Press; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 81–4.

²⁷Sébastien Malette, 'De-colonizing Foucault's historical ontology: Toward a postcolonial ethos', *Postcolonial Studies*, 15:3 (2012), pp. 369–387 (p. 371).

²⁸Peden, 'Foucault', p. 76; cf. Foucault, *Archeology*.

²⁹Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979 [1975]); *The History of Sexuality* Volume 1: *The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1981 [1976]).

³⁰Young, *White Mythologies*, p. 118; citing Michel Foucault, 'Politics and the study of discourse', *Ideology and Consciousness*, 3 (1978), pp. 7–26 (p. 14).

³¹Young, *White Mythologies*, p. 118.

³²Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault's Archeology of Scientific Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 284.

³³Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; cf. Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*, p. 140.

³⁴Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*, p. 143.

³⁵Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, p. 112; see e.g. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.

differently.³⁶ Once again, the question arises: are we talking about modes of subjection and subjectification specific to particular periods? Or, as Han asks, is the self-constituting capacity of the self a more universal capacity – an ontological feature of the self that can take different historical forms?³⁷ If there is nothing ontological to the self-to-self relationship, it becomes difficult to understand why Foucault can reach back to the ancient Greeks for inspiration for how to relate to the self *differently*, how to become a *different* subject. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Han's book, translated into English as *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, was originally published in French as *L'Ontologie manquée de Michel Foucault* – 'Michel Foucault's missing ontology'.

While Han represents Foucault's stance towards ontology as one of inescapable ambivalence, Malette is less circumspect, insisting that an ontology of finitude and contingency in fact underlies Foucault's work. Others go further, deriving from Foucault a 'strong' ontology that folds together differences in their irreconcilability.³⁸ Yet whether we consider Foucault's ontology to be missing in action or implicit within his work, Foucault's project is a powerful illustration of William Connolly's claim that every analysis – even those that claim to historicise or critique all ontological claims – cannot evade ontological assumptions.³⁹

All of this has had significant consequences for Foucauldian studies of the international. In the 1990s, scholars used the work of Foucault – and other authors then commonly grouped under the label 'poststructuralism' – to critique dominant political ontologies (e.g. the ones found in mainstream IR). While this was accompanied by a refusal to map out any alternative general theory, on the basis that it is impossible to establish secure ontological grounds for those,⁴⁰ the ontological assumptions were still there. Poststructuralist IR has been criticised, both for tacitly reproducing the political ontologies underlying mainstream policy discourse and, at a deeper level, for embracing unacknowledged ontological assumptions.⁴¹ These – like Foucault's 'missing' ontology – affirm 'the truth of essential historicity, essential opacity in identity, the insufficiency of the rules of reason in discourse, and a permanent tension between human projects and the world in which they are enacted.'⁴² In some more recent work, by contrast, ambiguity and relationality are put on clearly specified ontological grounds and afforded emancipatory potential. Laura Zanotti, for example, spells out the need for a 'relational ontology' that understands 'the pillar concepts of Western political thought' as emerging relationally and thus as ambiguous and unstable.⁴³ Similarly, in a Special Issue on Foucault's concept of counter-conduct, Olga Demetriou identifies precisely the need for ontological assumptions, calling for an analysis of counter-conduct 'as constitutive of governmentality in the everyday', with the 'everyday' as 'a particular mode of being' that is based on an ontology of process and fluidity, according to which 'conduct and counter-conduct are always in process and always under question.'⁴⁴ Such responses are along the lines of the solution to the problem

³⁶Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*, p. 163; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* Volume 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1987 [1984]), p. 6.

³⁷Han, *Foucault's Critical Project*, p. 162.

³⁸Widder, *Political Theory*, p. 24.

³⁹Connolly, 'Irony of interpretation', pp. 144–5.

⁴⁰See e.g. Richard W. Ashley and R. B. J. Walker, 'Reading dissidence/writing the discipline: Crisis and the question of sovereignty in international studies', *International Studies Quarterly*, 34:3 (1990), pp. 367–416 (p. 368).

⁴¹For a critique of the reproduction of mainstream political ontologies, see e.g. Lara M. Coleman and Doerthe Rosenow, 'Security (studies) and the limits of critique: Why we should think through struggle', *Critical Studies on Security*, 4:2 (2016), pp. 202–20; Leonie Ansems de Vries, Lara Montesinos Coleman, Doerthe Rosenow, Martina Tazzioli, and Rolando Vázquez, 'Collective discussion: Fracturing politics (or, how to avoid the tacit reproduction of modern/colonial ontologies in critical thought)', *International Political Sociology*, 11 (2017), pp. 90–108.

⁴²Connolly, 'Identity and difference', p. 338.

⁴³Laura Zanotti, 'Governmentality, ontology, methodology: Re-thinking political agency in the global world', *Alternatives*, 38:4 (2013), pp. 288–304 (p. 290).

⁴⁴Olga Demetriou, 'Counter-conduct and the everyday: Anthropological engagements with philosophy', *Global Society*, 30:2 (2016), pp. 218–237 (p. 220).

of the inescapability of ontological assumptions that Connolly advocated in the 1990s: ontological (or 'onto-political') assumptions should be made explicit given their implications for ethical or political claims, but they should remain at the level of what Stephen White denotes 'weak ontology', meaning that they should always remain tentative and contestable.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, the difficulty arises that constant affirmation of ambiguity and of identity as constructed and contestable can be mobilised to support those who have an interest in arguing that reality is too 'complex' and power too 'diffuse' to allow for deeper social transformation. From this perspective, it is of little surprise that Foucauldian social science has sometimes been accused of political apathy, or even conservatism in its implications.⁴⁶ This being the case, it is noteworthy that some of the most compelling recent engagements with Foucault in IR have attempted to combine a Foucault-inspired analysis with broader theories of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and so forth in a manner that moves beyond the once tightly guarded camps of 'poststructuralist' versus 'Marxist' versus 'postcolonial' IR.⁴⁷ These studies have included careful attempts to – in Marta Iñiguez de Heredia's words – 'expand' Foucault's understanding of power and resistance as relational, and of discourses as 'circular, contradictory and tactical', to 'incorporate the fact that the effects of ... discourses reach the global-colonial sphere of power – the matrix that since colonisation has constituted a global structure of power' (which Iñiguez de Heredia understands through the theories of Aníbal Quijano and Ramón Grosfoguel).⁴⁸ Nevertheless, this points us back to the questions raised in the introduction to this article. How do we hold firmly to the historicity of concepts and nevertheless ground our analysis in an understanding of global histories and structures? Those who seek to combine Foucault with a stronger identification of global structures of power end up with a problem closer to that with which Foucault actively grappled in his earlier work. That is, how can we make claims about the conditions of possibility of knowledge in a general way, the principle of coherence of an episteme, the forces that shape constellations of knowledge, without jettisoning the very historicity, contingency, and sense of discontinuity that inspires the use of Foucauldian tools? To invoke the theories of a modern/colonial matrix of power or world history as structural background⁴⁹ for a more detailed Foucauldian-inflected analysis of discourses (or indeed, 'reverse discourses' and 'counter-conducts') is to run up against the contradiction with which Foucault grappled, a contradiction with much at stake for transformational political praxis.

This is a tension well recognised in Jenny Barrett's thoughtful intervention regarding the use of Foucault's concept of 'counter-conduct' within a framework that also recognises how Foucault's own development of such concepts was informed by Eurocentrism, for which she draws on work done by us.⁵⁰ Like others seeking to combine Foucault's thinking tools with a more decolonial

⁴⁵Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); cf. Connolly, 'Foreword', pp. ix–x.

⁴⁶Ansgar Allen and Roy Goddard, 'The domestication of Foucault: Government, critique, war', *History of the Human Sciences*, 27:5 (2014), pp. 26–53.

⁴⁷See e.g. Kerem Nişancıoğlu and Maïa Pal, 'Counter-conduct in the university factory: Locating the Occupy Sussex campaign', *Global Society*, 30:2 (2016), pp. 279–300; Anna Selmezi, 'Haunted by the rebellion of the poor: Civil society and the racialized problem of the (non-)economic subject', *Foucault Studies*, 20 (2015), pp. 52–75; Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Jenny Barrett, 'Counter-conduct and its intra-modern limits', *Global Society*, 34:2 (2020), pp. 260–84; Marta Iñiguez de Heredia, 'Reversing "liberal" aspirations: A view from "citizens" movements in Africa', *Global Society*, 36:3 (2022), pp. 409–30.

⁴⁸Iñiguez de Heredia, 'Reversing "liberal" aspirations', p. 410. It needs to be pointed out that later in her article she mainly draws on African theories to understand the specificity of the region she is engaging with, such as the work of Mbembe and Mudimbe.

⁴⁹Quijano mobilises world systems theory in the work in which he develops the concept 'coloniality', with modernity/coloniality framed as an attempt to theorise the course of world history since 1492. Indeed, it is the political strength of Latin American decolonial thought to provide such a general account of power at large. See Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1:3 (2000), pp. 533–80; Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, 'Americanness as a concept, or the Americas in the modern world-system', *Determinants of Development*, 134 (1992), pp. 549–57.

⁵⁰See our (named) contribution to Ansems de Vries, 'Collective discussion.'

frame, Barrett suggests that to break the ‘intra-modern hold’ on Foucault’s concepts and recognise the broader stakes of struggle, it is important to complement them with conceptualisations of ‘connected sociologies’, ‘contrapuntal histories’, and ‘coloniality’.⁵¹ However, Barrett’s analysis is significant in that, drawing on earlier work by us, she suggests that what underpins the relevance of concepts such as ‘coloniality’ is not simply a ready-made theory that can be taken as a framework for Foucauldian analysis but their capacity to shed light upon dynamics of power that the concept of counter-conduct would not, on its own, allow us to see. Barrett explores this through her own research into Hong Kong’s 2014 Umbrella Movement. ‘Reading power through coloniality’, she emphasises, ‘frames an analysis of struggle’ that provides an important background for making sense of what the protesters articulate in their protest, even if just implicitly – not just simply liberal demands for democratic representation (even if it looks like that on the surface), but also ‘frustrations over economic exploitation’ that can only be understood against the backdrop of a regime of labour exploitation that goes back to colonial times.⁵² The productivity of concepts such as ‘coloniality’ is not simply taken as given but assessed on the basis of its explanatory power for a particular empirical case of political struggle.

The approach of Barrett and others shows how, rather than falling back upon ontological assumptions of essential historicity and contingency, the tension with which Foucault struggled can be reworked in another direction: one that is not afraid to make ‘global’ claims about how struggles are shaped by structural legacies of colonialism but which nevertheless remains open to a radical historicism. This is not to say that the tension is resolved, however. What is more, as we will now explore, many struggles against the depredations of capitalism, racism, and colonialism themselves maintain a commitment to the historicity or situated nature of concepts, alongside theorisation of global structures of power and violence, even when they are – at the same time – struggles over the very ontological commitments that make such theorisations possible. Once we engage with such struggles, the idea that we can simply mobilise certain concepts because of their explanatory power also needs to confront the need to step back and question ‘truth’ in relation to macro-historical accounts of capitalism and colonialism, not only because of their historical contingency but because of the very real violences attendant upon suppression of other worlds and ways of being human. In the next section, we explore how this dissonance and internal heterogeneity is not merely something to be overcome with more coherent theorisation or, alternatively, with a more stringent emphasis upon the historical contingency of all frames of reference, but something that is – and needs to be – held together in struggle. Although this will take us down a different route from Foucault himself, prompting a more explicit commitment to structural theorisations of power, and demanding engagement with actually existing dissonance at the level of ontological commitments, we will suggest that Foucault’s project can be put into fruitful conversation with the knowledge practices at play in struggle precisely because of the tension that undergirds his work.

Ontologies and theories in the praxis of struggle

Several scholars and activists have highlighted the extent to which many decolonial and Indigenous struggles draw on ontologies that differ from those underlying modernity, thereby questioning the latter’s claims to universality. It is upon this basis that Malette, in his article on ‘de-colonizing Foucault’, rejects what he identifies as Foucault’s ontology of finitude and contingency as an assimilationist monologue, instead advocating plural ontologies sitting side by side.⁵³ While critics have argued that the implication of such approaches is a relativism unable to grasp wider structures and/or provide a basis for Left solidarity,⁵⁴ such criticisms are often the product of a misconception of what it means for a struggle to be ontological. For instance, in an article on the ‘ontological

⁵¹ Barrett, ‘Counter-conduct’, p. 274.

⁵² Barrett, ‘Counter-conduct’, p. 275.

⁵³ Malette, ‘De-colonizing Foucault’, p. 381.

⁵⁴ See e.g. Graeber, ‘Radical alterity’.

dimension of the epistemologies of the South', Arturo Escobar affirms a world 'made up of multiple worlds, multiple ontologies' and gives the example of Colombian Afrodescendent struggles against extractive projects as being, at their heart, 'ontological struggles'. This is because of how they fight, not only for territory or a different economic model, but to preserve their own way of 'worlding', which is itself relational, involving 'three non-separate worlds': the infraworld, the human world, and the spiritual/superworld, with 'comings and going' happening 'between these worlds'.⁵⁵ For Escobar, coming from the Latin American decolonial tradition, this fight for a different 'worlding' needs to be understood in the context of coloniality, which is all about universalising modern ontology and (in the process) annihilating the existence of other 'worlds'. In short, why the ontological dimension of these struggles is significant is to be understood within the framework of coloniality, which implies a clear analysis of wider power structures and an understanding of modern/colonial world history. Indeed, it is important to recognise that the struggles that e.g. Escobar engages with are not merely characterised by ontological difference (making an ontological distinction between that which is 'modern' and that which is different to it), but also by ontological dissonance. By that, we mean that different ontologies are mobilised in struggle alongside critique of wider structures of power that draw on theories based on more typically modern/colonial ontologies and epistemologies. One of us – Lara Montesinos Coleman – has worked for several years as part of a network of social organisations in Colombia that includes the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN: Process of Black Communities). The PCN is an organisation bringing together more than 140 grassroots groups and community organisations to coordinate territorial struggles against extractive megaprojects and in defence of Black populations' way of life and right to remain on their land. Escobar is right to highlight the dimension of ontological difference within these struggles: these are very much struggles against the efforts of the Colombian state to 'impose one identity and one way of life', and the PCN is critical of Eurocentric models of Left thought that separate the material from the cultural. Yet this is also combined with deep historical analysis of political economy within a Marxist tradition.

The plural, shifting, and also, importantly, strategic nature of ontological assumptions at play in struggle is visible in Ana Carolina Teixeira Delgado's discussion of how Indigenous and peasant movements in Bolivia use the Aymara concept of *Suma Qamaña* (roughly: living well together, implying harmonious relations between humans and nature).⁵⁶ Here, far from being static and reified as a pre-existing identity descriptor, *Suma Qamaña* is a 'strategy of power' that is shifting and context-dependent, 'pervaded by power disputes, asymmetry and negotiations' (taken up and reshaped by the Morales government as well as being deployed in struggle against government policy and attempts to fix the meaning of *Suma Qamaña*).⁵⁷ What is more, *Suma Qamaña* as a 'new paradigm for humanity' is mobilised within Indigenous and peasant struggles against capitalism and structural racism, through analysis of how the present juncture has been shaped by colonial history, capitalism, racialisation, and class – in dialogue with non-Indigenous theory.⁵⁸ To overly emphasise the ontological potential of *Suma Qamaña* not only misses the ontological pluralism of these struggles but, as Delgado underscores with her emphasis upon the strategic mobilisation of *Suma Qamaña*, risks depoliticising the term.⁵⁹ Indeed, Aymara/Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has criticised well-known 'decolonial' scholars in the North American academy for neglecting the complex and plural counter-hegemonic strategies of Indigenous struggles in favour of an extractivist intellectual production that has commodified the thought of social

⁵⁵ Arturo Escobar, 'Thinking-feeling with the earth: Territorial struggles and the ontological dimension of the epistemologies of the South', *Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, 11:1 (2016), pp. 11–32 (p. 15).

⁵⁶ Ana C. T. Delgado, 'Suma Qamaña as a strategy of power: Politicizing the pluriverse', *Carta Internacional*, 13:3 (2018), pp. 236–61.

⁵⁷ Delgado, 'Suma Qamaña', pp. 240–2.

⁵⁸ Delgado, 'Suma Qamaña', pp. 244–5.

⁵⁹ Delgado, 'Suma Qamaña', p. 242.

movement intellectuals by means of neologisms such as ‘pluriversality’ that are then offered up for consumption in reified terms.⁶⁰

While Delgado emphasises the strategic mobilisation of ontological difference as a key political tool, for Navajo scholar and activist Melanie K. Yazzie, in relation to her own people’s resistance to mineral extraction in the United States, it is particularly important to draw out the pitfalls of Indigenous endorsements of the potential of development, and to use Marxist theory for that purpose. For Yazzie, an explicitly Marxist theorisation of capitalism is important for understanding ‘why tribal sovereignty and autonomy are perennially disempowered’.⁶¹ Marxism, she says, allows us to see development for what it really is: an attempt ‘to extend capitalist social relations’ through ‘sublime absorption’.⁶² Moreover, capitalism needs to be theorised in its ‘complex and interlocking’ relationship with the workings of settler colonialism as well as resource colonialism, in order to understand the suffering of the Navajo Nation.⁶³ Yet Yazzi’s insistence on this theorisation emerges out of the praxis of struggles that are already, implicitly, anti-capitalist, enacting ‘a politics of life that was both defensive (as in to defend life against the destruction of extraction) and generative (as in to caretake life through an ethos and practice of kinship obligation)’.⁶⁴ The latter is the basis and priority for political mobilisation because ‘a theory of connection in which relationality and movement define ontology’ poses a direct challenge to ‘(violent) liberal, capitalist and settler colonial modalities of time and space’.⁶⁵ At the same time, understanding that challenge only becomes possible through some sort of theorisation of the ‘death drive of capitalism and settler colonialism’ that does not just kill the Navajo physically, but also their relational ‘politics of life’.⁶⁶

Not all Indigenous thinkers who have addressed these questions advocate thinking between onto-epistemologies quite so directly. In her book, *As We Have Always Done*, Nishnabeeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson suggests that from an Indigenous position of ‘grounded normativity’,⁶⁷ theorisation has always worked differently. Instead of seeking to establish general, abstract theories on the basis of empirical evidence, observation, or experience, theories ‘are woven into doing, they are layered in meaning, they can be communicated through story, action, and embodied presence’.⁶⁸ Simpson is more circumspect than Yazzie about the potential of theorising power on the basis of Marxist theory. She points out that Nishnabeeg’s ‘intelligence’ renders the very concept of ‘capital’ unintelligible and is therefore profoundly anti-capitalist *qua* definition.⁶⁹ This means that capitalism can be criticised from within Nishnabeeg ‘grounded normativity’ without extensive engagement with Marxism.⁷⁰ That said, this does not mean Western theories have no use. For Simpson too, such theories ‘can be very useful for Indigenous scholarship and mobilization

⁶⁰ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, ‘Ch’ixinakax utxiwa: A reflection on the practices and discourses of decolonization’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 111:1 (2012), pp. 95–109. Cf. Doerthe Rosenow, ‘Decolonising the decolonisers? Of ontological encounters in the GMO controversy and beyond’, *Global Society*, 33:1 (2019), pp. 82–99, for a related critique of the use of the concept of the ‘pluriverse’, specifically in IR.

⁶¹ Melanie K. Yazzie, ‘Decolonizing development in Diné Bikeyah’, *Environment and Society*, 9 (2018), pp. 25–39 (p. 29, emphasis in original).

⁶² Yazzie, ‘Decolonizing development’, p. 28; quoting Joel Wainwright.

⁶³ Yazzie, ‘Decolonizing development’, p. 30.

⁶⁴ Yazzie, ‘Decolonizing development’, p. 34.

⁶⁵ Yazzie, ‘Decolonizing development’, pp. 34–5.

⁶⁶ Yazzie, ‘Decolonizing development’, p. 31.

⁶⁷ ‘Grounded normativity’ is a term coined by Glen Coulthard, who defines it as the normative foundation of Indigenous ‘place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge’ that are characterised by ‘reciprocal relations and obligations.’ Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 60, 13.

⁶⁸ Leanne B. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 56.

⁶⁹ Simpson, *Always Done*, pp. 72, 77.

⁷⁰ Simpson, *Always Done*, p. 72.

particularly when they are considered *within* grounded normativity or *within* Indigenous thought systems.⁷¹

Here too, then, are dissonant ontologies, indeed onto-epistemologies, shaping – and produced through – the praxis of struggle against oppression. What is more, to think and act within the terms of Nishnabeeg, Navajo, or Aymara onto-epistemologies is implicitly to recognise the historically contingent nature of the non-Indigenous theories and tools of structural critique that are mobilised to make sense of what it is these struggles are up against, insofar that these theories are considered to be useful regardless of their underlying different (potentially even mutually exclusive) ontologies. Yet this does not imply relativism, as if any ontological assumptions will do. Dissonant ontologies and (related) theories may be invoked, but on the grounds of what enables engagement in struggle – often at great cost. They are shaped through, even demanded by, the experience of struggle. To some extent, Foucault's own remarks on a 1968 visit to Tunisia, in which he distinguished the Marxism animating the Tunisian left from the theoretical endeavour of Marxism in European academia, are pertinent here. 'Marxism didn't just represent a better way of analysing reality', Foucault wrote. It was also 'a kind of moral energy' arising in response to the 'unbearable quality of certain situations produced by capitalism and (neo)colonialism'.⁷² The need for Marxist theories of capitalism or, for instance, Patrick Wolfe's theory of settler colonialism (which is cited by both Yazzie and Simpson) emerges from the experience of oppression giving rise to struggle, from confronting the 'death drive' of those phenomena. Yet by the same token, the invocation of dissonant onto-epistemological terms of reference should not be considered *merely* a 'moral energy' immanent to movement discourse and practice, any more than invocation of Indigenous ontologies should be thought of as *merely* strategic in opposition to capitalism. Such an understanding would take us back to Connolly's 'weak ontology': endorsing ontological claims as a basis for a political project, while accepting the 'projectional' nature of those claims.⁷³ Simply affirming ontological claims as projections fails to do justice to the life and death implications of questions of ontology for those in struggle, or to the way in which Indigenous ontologies are 'woven into doing'. As Simpson's work makes clear, particularly in the context of Canada's policy of 'recognition' in relation to its Indigenous peoples, emphasising ambiguity and the need for critical distance and historicisation can become ammunition for the settler state itself, as a further way of sowing doubts about stable and separate identities of Indigenous peoples that make claim to the state's territory. Yet that very claim is the result of a structural – even general – analysis, which Simpson explicitly promotes. Indeed, it is particularly important, Simpson argues, to make the Canadian settler colonialism visible *as a structure* (as opposed to a concluded historical event) in order to show that it has always been about the appropriation of Indigenous lands and the annihilation of Indigenous peoples (as peoples).⁷⁴

Not all struggles against capitalist extraction and (neo)colonialism draw upon their own 'grounded normativities'. Nor do we seek to collapse together the diverse ways in which plural ontologies combine in these different writings and struggles. There are important differences of context between the struggles that we have identified, for which there is no space for further discussion here. Nevertheless, in the next section, we want to suggest that the ways in which the world at large is theorised in struggle – particularly in struggles such as these, where dissonant ontologies co-exist within the praxis of struggle – can point to an approach to theory that addresses the problem faced by Foucault in a more productive way than via affirmation of a 'weak' ontology extracted from Foucault's own commitments, or via a relativistic affirmation of plural ontologies that fails to address the world at large.

⁷¹ Simpson, *Always Done*, p. 56 (emphasis in original).

⁷² Foucault, 'Interview', pp. 280–1.

⁷³ Connolly, 'Foreword', pp. ix–x; 'Irony of interpretation'.

⁷⁴ Simpson, *Always Done*, pp. 46–7.

On struggle as experiment

So far, we have only set out some of the ways in which ‘big picture’ questions of global capitalism and (neo)colonialism are theorised in struggle, in a plural and open-ended fashion, holding in tension dissonant ontologies and theorisations but without ending up in mere affirmation of contingency and ambiguity. What we now want to suggest is that taking struggle as a starting point – in dialogue with Foucault and the epistemological tradition in which he was situated – can provide us with an approach to theory within critical scholarship more generally. This approach embodies a more affirmative stance toward ‘general’ theoretical claims than Foucault himself and does not lose sight of how and why ontological commitments matter in attempts to transform the world. Nevertheless, it also embraces a commitment to historicity and contingency, a Foucauldian insistence on the immanence of truth to systems of power and knowledge, and to the inseparability of subject and object.

Rather than abandoning Foucault, we would suggest with Young and others that Foucault’s vacillation between radical historicisation and general/ontological claims is what makes his project generative in the face of tendencies in critical scholarship (within IR and social science more broadly) to enclose itself within the parameters of a singular theoretical perspective (be it post-structuralist, Marxist, decolonial, or otherwise). Even as critical scholarship has moved toward the need to make space for ‘other’ ontologies, and to decolonise knowledge production, there is a risk that other ontologies or various neologisms drawn from decolonial movement intellectuals are incorporated into disciplinary concerns in the way that Rivera Cusicanqui criticises.⁷⁵ From this perspective, it may be that, as Young suggests, ‘far from being the result of theoretical ineptitude’, the tensions of Foucault’s project are ‘designed to undermine the claims of theoretical mastery, and to produce in his texts surface effects of the kind of heterogeneity we might expect from someone who had contested the unifying function of “the author”’.⁷⁶

It is in this light that we consider it useful to turn back to Foucault and – more broadly – to the French epistemological tradition within which his own attempt to grapple with questions of truth and historicity was situated. Foucault’s own ‘emphasis on the history of science as an epistemological study of the formation of concepts, a process ... which defines both the object and the problem that is being made intelligible’ was derived in great part from the philosophy of natural science of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem.⁷⁷ Canguilhem’s work on the history of concepts within the life sciences was particularly influential on Foucault’s approach to the human sciences because the life sciences had no claim to the validation procedures of the pure sciences, making their history one of ‘veridical discourses’ rather than incremental establishment of scientific truth.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, despite being developed in the philosophy of physics, Bachelard’s concept of the problematic was influential on Foucault’s idea of ‘problematisation’ because of its emphasis on the co-constitution of subject and object in the posing of a specific problem.⁷⁹ After developments such as quantum mechanics or Einstein’s theories of relativity, Bachelard underscored that there is little room in science for neat distinctions between reality ‘out there’ and the concepts that make sense of it, between the observer and the observed, between being and transformation. Electrons and photons, for instance, can be conceptualised in two (incompatible) ways, depending on how we interact with them. In the design of a photovoltaic cell, photons are conceptualised as particles, which hit electrons in the cell, generating electricity. However, to understand multicoloured patterns of refracted light through a prism, photons must be conceptualised as waves. It makes

⁷⁵Rivera Cusicanqui, ‘*Ch’ixinakax utxiwa*’.

⁷⁶Young, *White Mythologies*, pp. 121–2.

⁷⁷Young, *White Mythologies*, pp. 105–6; cf. Foucault, *Archaeology*, pp. 4–5.

⁷⁸Michel Foucault, ‘Foucault’, in J. B. Faubion (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Volume 2: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York: New Press, 1998), pp. 459–484 (p. 460); citing Canguilhem.

⁷⁹Gaston Bachelard, ‘Corrationalism and the problematic’, trans. Mary Tiles, *Radical Philosophy*, 173 (2012), pp. 27–32 [excerpt of Gaston Bachelard, *Le Rationalisme Appliqué*, 5th edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1975 [1949]), pp. 50–60]; Foucault, ‘Enlightenment’.

no sense to ask if photons are ‘really’ waves or particles. Bachelard thus emphasised the ‘fictional’ nature of scientific statements and insisted that the ‘structures of nature’ were a product of the intellect.⁸⁰ This does not make them any less real though, or we would be unable to scientifically manipulate them and intervene in the world.⁸¹

Yet, despite his influence on Foucault, there are important aspects of Bachelard’s ‘problematic’ that did not filter through into Foucault’s thinking on the human sciences. Bachelard emphasised the inseparability, not only of subject and object, but also of the practical techniques of scientific experimentation and the theories through which scientists set up experiments. Through the experiment, there is a mode of ‘validation’ of a theory but – and this is crucial – we should not consider scientific theories to be anchored outside of the specific problems through which a theory is both constructed and called into question.⁸² Just as the object of scientific study has no ‘fixed’ material essence, theories too emerge only in the context of practical solutions and intervention in the world, effectively generating realities under investigation. ‘Facts’ (whether light is composed of waves or particles for instance) are validated relationally by reference to theoretical reference points, which point to one another ‘as in a play of echoes.’⁸³ Bachelard himself was still convinced that only science can generate actual ‘truth’ about the world and would have rejected any use of his philosophy of science to consider political questions.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Bachelard is not alone in emphasising the need for general theories to inform the material practice of experiment. More contemporarily, Karen Barad offers similar insights about the role of theory, mobilising Niels Bohr’s quantum mechanics to argue that ‘theoretical concepts are not ideational in character’, but are ‘specific physical arrangements.’⁸⁵ She thus argues for a ‘performative account’ of ‘thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being’,⁸⁶ actively seeking to extend her method to read the insights of different disciplines through one another – including physics, humanities, and social science.

This is not the place to delve into the differences between Bachelard and Barad. Rather, we seek to build on this approach to theory in philosophy of science to suggest that approaching general theories as preliminary and unsettled starting points for experiment need not be restricted to the pure sciences, or to scientific modes of validation. Theory, a sense of ‘reality in its completeness’ as a means of grasping relations of power and oppression ‘by the root’,⁸⁷ can also be considered inseparable from wider practices of engagement with the world, both constructed and put into question within struggle. This, we sustain, enables a different way into the problem of how to hold ontological plurality and contingency, historicity *and* general theorisation together in a way that allows for a stronger focus on how all of this always shifts and changes, how everything is constantly put into question. Engaging with struggle in this way highlights the need for constant critical distance within academic knowledge production, eschewing enclosure within a fixed framework but without shying away from making general claims of the sort necessary for tackling the ‘death drives’ of capitalism, racism, and colonialism.⁸⁸ In her book, *Struggles for the Human: Violent Legality*

⁸⁰See Bachelard, ‘Corrationalism’; Cristina Chimento, ‘From phenomenology to phenomenotechnique: The role of early twentieth century physics in Gaston Bachelard’s philosophy’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 39:3 (2008), pp. 384–392 (pp. 387–8).

⁸¹Chimento, ‘From phenomenology’, pp. 387–8.

⁸²Bachelard, ‘Corrationalism’, pp. 28–31; Chimento, ‘From phenomenology’, pp. 387–8.

⁸³Patrice Maniglier, ‘What is a problematic?’, *Radical Philosophy*, 173 (2012), pp. 21–3. Cf. our argument in Ansems de Vries et al., ‘Collective discussion’, p. 105.

⁸⁴Chimento, ‘From phenomenology’, p. 391; Isabelle Stengers, ‘Putting problematization to the test of our present’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 38:2 (2021), pp. 71–92 (p. 79).

⁸⁵Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 109.

⁸⁶Barad, *Meeting the Universe*, p. 133.

⁸⁷Lucas Bessire and David Bond, ‘Ontological anthropology and the deferral of critique’, *American Ethnologist*, 41:3 (2014), pp. 440–456 (p. 441).

⁸⁸Cf. Yazzie, ‘Decolonizing development’.

and the Politics of Rights, one of us – Lara Montesinos Coleman – offers an account of ontological dissonance and the role of theory in struggle that directly mobilises upon Bachelard’s philosophy of science in this way. Montesinos Coleman draws upon her own involvement with peasant and Indigenous struggles to reclaim land from which populations had been forcibly displaced in the service of capitalist extraction and/or to remain living on the land in the face of the threat of dispossession in Colombia. Beyond the struggle for territory, these processes – known as *planes de vida* (plans of/for life) – aspire to build inclusive and sustainable alternative social relations, through radically democratic processes and in opposition to state and corporate-backed development. The concept of *buen vivir*, which derives from Andean Indigenous cosmovisions and is similar in meaning to *Suma Qamaña*, connoting harmonious relations between humans and between human and non-human life, has become central to the *planes de vida* across different regions of the country.⁸⁹ Yet, as with the Bolivian Indigenous and peasant struggles discussed by Delgado and Rivera Cusicanqui, here too Indigenous understandings of the deep connections between humanity and nature and non-linear time co-exist with a Marxist, anti-colonial tradition of critique of political economy that seeks to unearth the roots of oppression. These theoretical tools are not merely derived in advance from scholarly texts but shaped through the experience of struggle in what is often described as an ongoing process of ‘diagnosis’: accounts of ‘what we are up against’, and of histories giving rise to the current conjuncture, are shaped through intervening in the world and trying to change it. When those involved in the *planes de vida* redefine ‘life’ by invoking *buen vivir*, it is – crucially – in relation to a diagnosis of those relations of power that destroy and degrade life.⁹⁰ Far from being a statement of straightforward ontological difference, *buen vivir* is framed explicitly by movement intellectuals as an ‘unfinished’, open-ended concept that is mobilised directly in opposition to ‘development’, with its associated notions of progress and the human as economic-rational actor, which has brought death, displacement, and the destruction of the land. Montesinos Coleman suggests we might think of this ontological dissonance ‘as a constitutive incoherence, akin to that in physics where light can be composed of either wave or particle, depending on how you interact with it, although it cannot be both.’⁹¹ Building on this, we might think of macro-historical or general accounts of capitalism, colonialism, and so on, as well as the concepts that are used to make sense of them, as reference points that are put to the test within struggle, in a manner similar to theoretical reference points in science. Through struggle, and through connections with struggles elsewhere, a greater sense of global relations of power comes to invest practice. Yet this is never coherent or absolute and can never be captured by any one (or indeed several) concept(s). Ontological commitments emerge and shift in struggle through the process of interaction with the world. They are reference points to be persistently fractured and decentred, making space for other coordinates to emerge.⁹² This also brings us close to Simpson’s notion of theory. When Simpson, for example, cites Patrick Wolfe’s definition of settler colonialism, it is likewise a reference point rather than a fully formed perspective that is simply applied. And her outline of what ‘theory’ means from within her grounded normativity as Nishnabeeg has similarities as well to what we might think of as the ‘experiment’ of struggle: ‘It became clear to me that *how* we live, *how* we organize, *how* we engage in the world – the process – not only frames the outcome, it is the transformation. *How* molds and then gives birth to the present. The *how* changes us. *How* is the theoretical intervention.’⁹³

⁸⁹ Antonio Luis Hidalgo-Capitán and Ana Patricia Cubillo-Guevara, ‘Deconstrucción y genealogía del “buen vivir” latinoamericano: El “buen vivir” y sus diverso manantiales intelectuales’, *International Development Policy/Revue internationale de politique de développement* 9 (2017), available at: {<https://journals.openedition.org/poldev/2517>}.

⁹⁰ Lara Montesinos Coleman, *Struggles for the Human: Violent Legality and the Politics of Rights* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming February 2024), pp. 156–161.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁹² Cf. our argument in Ansems de Vries et al., ‘Collective discussion’, p. 105.

⁹³ Simpson, *Always Done*, p. 19 (emphasis in original).

If we think about struggle on the basis of such an understanding of ‘experimental’ practice,⁹⁴ appeals to the whole or the structure of power (and consequent unified identities, categories, and oppositions) need not entrap us within a fixed framework in the sense that so troubled Foucault. Nor need it imply a monological account that precludes dissonant ontologies. Theory – in the sense of a general understanding of reality ‘in its completeness’ – can be understood with Bachelard as a set of coordinates for setting up an experiment, or intervention in the world, even though the theory is not anchored outside of the problem itself.⁹⁵ Theory here is not merely tactical, or reducible to a ‘moral energy.’⁹⁶ Rather, there is a mode of validation (or devalidation) of theory that takes place through the experiment. General theories of power and domination, which in turn rely on particular ontological assumptions, provide reference points for the process of ‘diagnosis’ of wider power relations. This process of diagnosis often shifts and is deepened within struggle, as movements gain a deeper comprehension of power relations through the experience of engagement in the world, encountering power ‘hitting back’ in the form of repression, attempts at co-optation, or simply by confronting the intractability of the system. This deeper sense of power relations is augmented through connections with others in struggle and reflection upon how initial theoretical starting points may have been complicit with relations of domination – for example, in the form of racialised or heteropatriarchal modes of power/knowledge that have shaped Eurocentric Left strategy.

There is space here too for the dissonant ontologies, rationales, and forms of subjectivity that shape the quest for less harmful social relations. Instead of approaching these as fixed essences, we must – as Delgado, Yazzie, and Montesinos Coleman insist from different perspectives – understand the mobilisation of ontological difference as it is shaped in relation to theory, a preliminary ‘diagnosis’ of what a movement is up against, what is at stake. Thus, for instance, historical materialist analyses of capitalism and *buen vivir* or *Suma Qumãña* may co-exist, as ‘new’ conceptualisations are added to old ones, in pursuit of a completeness that is always contradictory, because ‘reality can never completely assimilate to any given theory that leads us to attempt an experiment.’⁹⁷ As already indicated, this has important implications for the production of academic knowledge, including the concepts that it coins and the general sense-making strategies it employs. As we will outline in the concluding section, it not only allows for a different way of holding ontological plurality and contingency, generality, and historicity together, it also makes us hold on to what we think is so valuable in Foucault’s work – his ethos of ambivalence and emphasis on the constant need for

⁹⁴It is worth distinguishing the understanding of ‘experiment’ advanced here from that popularised recently in Science and Technologies Studies, particularly through the work of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers. Also taking inspiration from the practice of scientific experimentation, these scholars put forward a conception of politics as the construction of a common world, in which ever-new ontologies and their entities find their place, creating new ways of living/being together. This approach allows for a strategic shifting and mobilisation of different ontologies in the attempt to construct a shared ‘cosmos’ that is in constant transformation, avoiding the reification of ontological difference. Nevertheless, as one of us, Doerthe Rosenow, has argued in depth elsewhere in relation to the work of Latour in particular, the focus lies strongly on the process of accommodating different ontologies, rather than the analysis of systemic violences that shape and ground this process of accommodation. While the work of Stengers allows for a greater focus on struggle and social movement activism as seeking the construction of the common world, in her work there is still little focus on the ‘diagnosis’ (involving theories of violences and dispossession) that takes place as part of struggle. There is the danger that this ‘diagnosis’ is yet again simply a ‘tactic’ of the struggle itself, as Foucault himself had it, rather than providing a meaningful understanding of systemic violence in and of itself. Indeed, Stengers own concept of ‘experiment’, which she develops elsewhere in relation to Foucault’s characterisation of his historico-critical attitude as ‘experimental’ – is conceived as an experiment on ourselves. Detailed consideration of these differences is beyond the scope of this article but see, *inter alia*, Isabelle Stengers, ‘The cosmopolitical proposal’, in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 994–1003; Bruno Latour, ‘Whose cosmos, which cosmopolitics? Comments on the peace terms of Ulrich Beck’, *Common Knowledge*, 10:3 (2004), pp. 450–62. For critique, see Doerthe Rosenow, *Un-making Environmental Activism*.

⁹⁵Bachelard, ‘Corrationalism’, p. 30.

⁹⁶Cf. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 216.

⁹⁷See our argument in Ansems de Vries et al., ‘Collective discussion’, p. 104. See also James Williams, *The Transversal Thought of Gilles Deleuze: Encounters and Influences* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2005), pp. 59–60.

critical distance to what we hold for true – without giving up on attempts to theorise power and what we are up against at large.

Conclusion: Thinking through struggle

We have sought in this article to think with – and beyond – Foucault, in dialogue with decolonial struggle, towards another approach to the dilemma that shaped Foucault's project throughout: how to address 'questions of general import' with the ontological investment this implies, while emphasising the immanence of truth to systems of power and knowledge. While none of the struggles we have discussed here raise the issue in quite the same terms, they highlight the political stakes of this question. The demands of struggle on the ground can require an ontological dissonance that implies recognition of historicity and fluidity at the same time that they make it impossible to suspend the need to theorise wider structures of power. By interrogating this tension within Foucault's project as a whole, it was never our intention to advocate 'for' or 'against' Foucault. Yet we have found a focus on this tension at the heart of his project to be generative. What if the contradiction that appears to be the most substantial weakness of Foucault's project is in fact its greatest strength?⁹⁸ In this spirit, Young picks up on Foucault's brief allusion to Deleuze's idea of the phantasmic event, the simulacra that hover over any attempt to transcend historicity, to constitute an event as such through its repetition in thought.⁹⁹ Foucault's ontology, we might say, is not just 'missing' and so absent. It haunts his writing as a constitutive lack, a reminder of the impossibility of History, and – with it – the contingency of all ontological claims. Even as we move beyond Foucauldian concepts and towards a less reticent approach to general theories, histories, and ontological claims, we might read Foucault's project as a prompt towards precisely the sort of ambivalence that thinking through the 'experiment' of struggle demands.

We have seen how struggles against capitalist extraction and (neo)colonialism can embody dissonant ontological commitments and theoretical tools of structural critique that shape struggle – and are shaped by struggle in turn. These theories and ontologies have high stakes. They cannot be considered merely projective claims, endorsed as a strategic basis for a political project. This is where the metaphor of 'experiment' is helpful. The structures of nature are products of the intellect – light has to be understood as both wave and particle although, in their very incompatibility, both understandings are fictions. Yet this does not make the light any less real or imply that the light refracted through the clouds is not the same light that generates electricity. What is more, the metaphor of 'experiment' underscores the fundamental role of theoretical reference points – understandings of reality as a whole – which are required to set up an experiment at the same time as they are put into question in the process of intervention in the world. Thinking through struggle as experiment requires both that we give weight to the 'diagnoses' of power relations that emerge in struggle, as theories are put to through the test of practice, whilst adopting a theoretical humility, an awareness that reality can never assimilate to our theories, that liberatory praxis may require plural incoherent, even contradictory ontological commitments.

What does it mean for critical scholarship to embody such an ethos of inquiry? In part, this is an affirmation of the work already being done that seeks to combine an emphasis upon the structures of capitalism, the history of a modern/colonial world system, and so on, with a Foucauldian sensitivity to the historicity of concepts (whether or not such studies invoke Foucauldian categories of thought). However, thinking through the metaphor of experiment is also a prompt to pay attention to lived thought, to interrogate concepts and frameworks by considering what happens to knowledge if we come from a perspective that centres the struggles and the political analyses of historically marginalised and oppressed peoples. Rather than just engaging in criticism of relations of power and oppression, or legislating for transformational praxis on the basis of that

⁹⁸Young, *White Mythologies*, pp. 121–2; Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*.

⁹⁹Young, *White Mythologies*, pp. 121–2.

critique, it is important to ask what can be learnt from critical thought shaped through struggle. How, for instance, might Navajo resistance or Nishnabeeg resurgence speak back to Marxist theories of capitalism or Patrick Wolfe's theory of settler colonialism upon which both Simpson and Yazzie draw? How might engagement with the ways in which Andean Indigenous and peasant struggles invoke concepts such as *buen vivir* or *Suma Qumaña* alongside historical materialist analyses of global capitalism, (neo)colonialism, and structural racism speak back to theories that privilege ontological difference to the exclusion of structural critique? This does not mean taking these struggles as *the* source of truth, but it is a provocation toward thinking in dialogue, listening, and being willing to unlearn as well as to learn: not just in relation to the 'results' of a study, but in the very way in which we establish problems for investigation. As Simpson emphasises in relation to Nishnabeeg thought, 'the only thing that doesn't produce knowledge is thinking in and of itself, because it is data created in dislocation and isolation and without movement'.¹⁰⁰

We are not offering this as a one-size-fits-all approach to critical scholarship. For one of us, the encounter with the dissonant knowledges shaped in struggle has involved direct engagement, but this lived thought is not just encountered in 'the field' of fieldwork but also in archives and libraries. If the idea of thinking through struggle as 'experiment' has a broader purchase, it is in the attentiveness it provokes, both to the historicity of concepts and for the need to make more general claims. Scholars in the social sciences are often trained out of this attentiveness. In the conventional approach to methods, there is a linear path: define your research question or problem, select your theoretical framework (which involves dealing with questions of ontology and epistemology), then comes your methodology as a way of linking all these preliminary steps with what you are actually going to need to conduct the inquiry. Thinking through the 'experiment' of struggle implies a different ethos of inquiry, approaching inquiry as an open-ended process, thinking of the relationship between method, theory, and concrete research problems in a less linear way – acknowledging that we are starting in the middle. Something central both to Bachelard's concept of the 'problematic', and to Foucault's reflections on 'problematization', is the need to persistently call into question the overall frame within which it becomes possible – or even necessary – to pose specific problems. For Foucault, it is through problematization that 'being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought'.¹⁰¹ What Bachelard and the metaphor of experiment add to this is the reminder that it is not just subject and object, but also theory – in the sense of an understanding of 'reality in its completeness' – that is put into question through interaction with the world.

Of course, we start with particular concepts and problems, but we need to acknowledge them as only preliminary starting points, actively looking for there being more to reality than we perhaps had the concepts to make sense of when we started. As such, thinking through struggle as experiment is a call to embrace a degree of dissonance, not to always feel the need to resolve tensions, or to work within a coherent 'theoretical framework' but rather to remember – in Lewis Gordon's words – 'that there is always more to and of reality'.¹⁰² This, is not to say that scholars should demur from making global – or indeed ontological – claims, be they in relation to capitalism, (settler) colonialism, the colonality of power, or about what it might mean to be human and the grounds of our responsibilities to one another and to non-human life. Rather, it is vital not to enclose everything in a fixed framework but instead, through attention to the praxis of struggle, to persistently be open to the possibility of what Foucault once called a 'way out'.

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¹⁰⁰ Simpson, *Always Done*, p. 20.

¹⁰¹ Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, p. 11.

¹⁰² Lewis Gordon, 'Shifting the geography of reason in an age of disciplinary decadence', *Transmodernity* (Fall 2011), pp. 95–103 (p. 98).

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