

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

## **Michel Foucault on the Deployment of Sexuality**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of Foucault's central tenets is that sexuality is a construct, a fabrication-invented to be wielded as a tool in the dissemination of what he calls bio-power. Therefore movements of sexual identity or sexual liberation are integral parts of that conspiracy mechanism for power domination (repression is not the most general form of domination). Hence belief that one is resisting repression, whether by self-knowledge or by telling the truth supports domination because it masks the real working of power. In this paper, I wish to first make an exposition of how Foucault arrived at this notion, after which I shall attempt to examine the strength and validity of this claim.

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Discourse, Self, Subjectivity, Power, Domination, Episteme.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Modern thought and culture identify sexuality with nature. Perhaps this is due to the influence of Freud more than anyone else. According to Freud, culture calls for putting the lid on this instinctive drive. The superego takes control and management of *Id*. Like Freud, we usually identify sex as an element of human nature. Foucault, on the other hand, draws our attention to the fact that sexuality is *both a discourse and a practice* that can be shown to have a *particular form of emergence* in Western culture. Viewed as an event, as the fulfillment of certain enunciative requirements, a discourse involves more than the creation and transmission of meaning. It finds itself linked to a field of non-discursive phenomena as well as to express forms of thought. My fascination with Foucault is that somehow he can show that a discursive object such as sexuality is determined by an entire apparatus. That is a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, etc. Foucault analyzes

the practice of confession extant in the Catholic Church as both exercise and means of control. The question of the confession manuals that call for explicit answers about the details of sexual acts constituted part of the process of turning sex into discourse. What Foucault stressed here is not whether the description is for purposes of absolution or for pleasure but rather that the speaker is responding to the injunction to tell all.

Power in Bourgeoisie society did not act mainly to repress or to silence sexuality that nonetheless expresses itself as all instincts must. Rather such power resulted in the multiplication of sexuality (Foucault 1990, p. 46). This proliferation starts with the categories of unnatural sex. The marriage relation was under constant and relentless surveillance. And whenever and wherever it was found wanting, it was brought forth before a witness to plead its case (Foucault 1990, p. 37). For instance, the inability to communicate the sexual duties of marriage was a violation of the Law and judged on the same platform as adultery (Andrew 2010, 2015). The law made only a relative distinction between sins such as debauchery, rape, adultery, incest, and sodomy. Though the category of 'sins against nature' had existed in Christian theology for a long time, it included things like usury which had nothing to do with sex. Sexual acts contrary to nature were punished more severely, but they were still in a fundamental sense violations of the law. There was such identity between nature and the Law that physically deformed individuals, hermaphrodites for instance could be classified as criminals.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, marriage ceases to be the focus of sexual control. The legitimate couple now became the norm against which all other sexuality was to be compared. The sex of children, of the mad and those who are attracted to the same sex now, became the focus of scrutiny. Thus various types of sexuality were distinguished, and the unnatural was set apart. This kind of activity assumed autonomy with regards to the other types of condemned forms like adultery or rape. And the latter was condemned less and less (Foucault 1990, p. 39). Now adultery, sodomy, sadism, and incest were all regarded as essentially different. The point Foucault is making here is that in the identification of prohibition and control, we neglect as a consequence the other ways in which control may be exerted. The sexuality of children for instance was not in the 19<sup>th</sup> century dealt with by simple prohibition as adultery had been. A child's masturbation was not regarded as a violation of Law, but as a matter calling for medical attention or parental discipline. Childhood *onanism* was treated like an epidemic for which a cause had to be found. This drove masturbation into hiding where it could then be 'discovered.' The sex of children hitherto taken for granted by society, now by becoming an object of scrutiny, became an even larger threat.

The medicalization of sex helped to create other sexual specializations. Hitherto homosexuality treated as isolated acts was condemned as sodomy, but now just as the penal system had transformed the person who had committed a crime into a

delinquent with a life history, so does 19<sup>th</sup>-century medicine create the homosexual who was also a case history and a life form. Homosexuality ceased being just sodomy and took on the form of internal, spiritual androgyny, a sort of Hermaphroditism of the soul. Where the sodomite had only been but a temporal freak; the homosexual now appears as a species (Foucault 1990, p. 43). It is as such that aberrant or deviant sexuality was not excluded from discourse, rather discourse found for each a niche, an open space, a local habitation and even a name. Sexual discourse takes on then for Foucault what he calls *scientia sexualis* i.e. sexual science. This, Foucault contrast with the *ars erotica* of ancient Rome and those of the Oriental world; where truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as practice, and accumulated as experience (Foucault 1990, p. 54). *Ars erotica* does not consist of rules, laws or norms but of methods. It does not permit or forbids neither does it distinguish nor name. Rather it evaluates the intensity of pleasure, its duration and qualities. This art is attained not by surveillance but by the initiation into a body of lore that leads to a mastery of its secret. So for Foucault, only in the Western societies do we find the technique of the ‘confessional’ where sexual truth takes the form of a discourse that is diametrically opposed to the *ars erotica*. It is as such that Foucault finds the confession to be the most central in the deployment of sexuality. The confession fuses the two forms of subjectivity first depicted in *The Order of things*. In this ritual of discourse, the speaking subject is at the same time the subject of the statement. It is a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for in confession, one confesses to a partner or albeit, a virtual one who is not simply an interlocutor, but the authority who requires the confession. In the history of sexuality, the individual is constituted as speaking and desiring subject with an inner realm of experience that the confession discloses. In the *Ars erotica*, it is a power relation of the teacher who passes down his wisdom to the pupil, while in *scientia sexualis* as typified by the confessional, it is the relation where the truth comes from below and handed up to the authority who demands it.

When confession ceased to be the exclusive preserve of the rite of penance and took on the role of a standard technique for authorities of all kinds, it also became the reservoir for the accumulation of a body of recorded knowledge, what Foucault calls *Archive*. The Christian confessions did not yield any such archive because it was not only secret discourse, it was also unrecorded. However the 19<sup>th</sup>-century sciences of medicine, psychiatry, pedagogy compiled and classified especially by the deviant pleasures that were described in the process of diagnosis. This was very different from the usual rigorous method of science. Rather than relying on observation and experimentation, this method was erected upon the questionable shreds of evidence provided by introspection and lived experience. Foucault lists five ways in which confession was transformed into a science. But this detail is not necessary for our purpose in this paper. However, the discourse that is produced by the confession in both its religious and scientific form is the sexuality that is deployed from the start of

the 1st century. Thus it is Foucault who argues in the 'Order of Things' that human sexuality is a recent invention, a construct. The effect of sexuality is not to reproduce existing relationships but to proliferate power by expanding the areas and forms control. And it is thus that it creates new relations of bodies and each other. Foucault is very much concerned with the concrete effect that discourses can have on the physical existence of men and women and children. And his analysis is with the purpose to disclose those minute yet tenacious hold that discourse can establish over and around our bodies. What links a discourse to bodies. What links a discourse to bodies results from a discourse's ability to produce and to convey power.

The deployment of sexuality did not replace the deployment of an alliance. For sexuality was deployed on top of the existing system of alliance (David 1989). To speak of the deployment of sexuality suggests that sexuality was like a tool or weapons system, put into service or action in someone's interest. This does not mean that it had been formulated in advance, as most tools are, but rather that like many other systems its development served the interest of those in political and economic power. Contrary to the assertion of the repressive hypothesis, the deployment of sexuality by the bourgeoisie in their own interest was not against the lower classes. Instead, it served as part of the general effort to assure health and prolong the life of the ruling classes. The most important element in the event of the deployment of sexuality is the transformation of the confession from a religious discourse to a medical one. So instead of preoccupation with the questions of death and everlasting punishment, we have the problem of life and illness. The flesh was brought down to the level of the organism (Foucault 1990, p. 117).

As a matter of health, sexuality was applied to those whom it was most important to keep healthy; the bourgeoisie. The laboring classes became subject to sexuality only after their deployment had been completed among the bourgeoisie. I therefore the bourgeoisie family that was first saturated with sex, and the bourgeoisie woman who, made idle by her prohibition from the economic world, was first sexualized by being charged with conjugal and parental obligations. For Foucault, the sexualized woman is not the same as the objects of sex- even though they are related. Sexualized in the sense that their sole mission is to produce and rear children. The limitation of this role confined them to a life of idleness in the home. This idleness led to many developing a multiplicity of nervous disorders that are subsumed under the general name of *hysteria*, from the Greek for uterus. Since these disorders were attributed to women's sexual organs, Foucault calls this the hysterization of women's bodies. Hence pathology was believed to be intrinsic to women's bodies. And women continued to be dominated by medicine that nurtured and spread this pathology. The masturbating child was alongside the hysterical woman and mother a product of 19<sup>th</sup> century regime of sexuality. Children's sexuality became a Pedagogical problem. The lawful sex of the conjugal couple became the subject of socialization. Fertility became

a domain for excitement and restriction. Couples were made to feel responsible for their society or race. Thus they became the objects of knowledge and power. These human products of sexuality have been produced by means of the disciplinary techniques in Discipline and Punish. For Foucault, they are part of the same shift in the character of political power.---- in the transformation of judicial punishment from public torture to the prison.

First, Foucault draws attention to the transformation of the old Roman *postetas*, to the sovereign (Foucault 1990). This power though not absolute, given the sovereign the capacity to indirectly propose the death of these subjects. He exercises this, [his] right only by exercising his right to kill-or refrain from killings. The subject's life became a sort of property of the sovereign. Since the classical age, however, a transformation took place of the mechanism of power from the dominant paradigm of deduction to that of management and generation of forces – putting itself on the side of a life administering power. Under the first aspects of this regime of *discipline*, what Foucault calls the *anatomo*-politics of the body, power no longer constituted itself as the sovereign's will, but as a positive force that is able to either foster life or disallow it to the point of death (Foucault 1990). War was no longer waged in the name of the sovereign to be defended but on behalf of the existence of everyone. From Foucault's point of view, the traditional depiction of power serves in effect to conceal the effective mechanism and workings of power. For it hides and conceals all the strategies that are actually the sources of power. Henceforth power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race and the large-scale phenomena of population. Another example is the transformation of the death sentence, not on the humanitarian ground but because of difficulty arising from the transformation of power mechanism to the administration of life.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the power over life evolved in two forms: the first, as we already saw was centered on the human body as a machine—the *disciplining*, and optimization of its capacities (Paras 2020). The second, centered on the species body, Body as imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, birth, and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity—with all its concomitant *conditions*. The regime of discipline was, only the first half of the new power of life. Foucault calls the second, *bio-power*. Bio-Power constitutes the body not in terms of the efficiency of a machine but as an organism (Turkel 1990). And it is as such that it finds placement under the biological processes. Sex became a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species. It was employed as a standard for the disciplines and as a basis for regulations. Through the themes of health, progeny, race and future of species, power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality—as the target. Its (sexuality's) importance was to its insistence, its insidious presence—everywhere an object at once of excitement and fear. Power delineated it, aroused it, and employed it as the proliferating meaning that had always

to be taken control of lest it escapes. Power is an effect with a meaning value. Foucault inverts the accepted perspective and meaning of power.

My general project over the past few years has been, in essence, to reverse the mode of analysis followed by the entire discourse of right from the time of the Middle Ages. My aim therefore was to invert it, to give due weight that is to the fact of domination, to expose both its latent nature and its brutality (Sembou 2016, p. 41).

Anticipating the objection of his critics for treating sexuality as if sex does not exist, Foucault says sex is the most speculative, the most ideal, and the most internal element in a deployment of sexuality *organized* by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures (Oksala 2014). And through the deployment of sexuality, sex gives each individual access to his own intelligibility. In a strictly historical, sex is imbued with the death instinct. For in its deployment sex is instilled in us as worth dying for. That for the sovereignty of truth of sex, life in its entirety can be exchanged. The irony of this deployment, says Foucault, lies in having us believe our *liberation* is in the balance. For by creating the imaginary element that is *sex*, the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles, the desire for sex - the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to *liberate* it, to articulate it in discourse and to formulate it in truth.

It is this desirability, according to Foucault, that makes us think we are affirming the right of our sex against all power, when in fact we are tied to the deployment of sexuality that has lifted up from deep within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected—the dark shimmer of sex. *Bio-Power* says Foucault, is an indispensable element in the development and success of capitalism. For capitalism would not have been possible without the insertion of the body into the mechanism of production and the manipulation of the population to fit the processes of economics (Dreyfus 1996). So one is tempted to ask the question of whether the relationship of sex to capitalism is that of *means to a goal* or *end*? Or is it as an instrument in the hands of power affecting power's will? Does this not spell teleology of some sort?

In a very brief discussion couched in the symbolic opposition of blood to law, Foucault depicts sexuality as being involved in the emergence of a more manifest and common form of domination: the face of modern racism as shown through the political frame of fascism. While the aristocrats traced their genealogy through (blue) blood, which weaves ancestral webs of alliances, the bourgeoisie finds its own identity of blood in its sex, its survival being focused on heredity rather than mere genealogy. And according to Foucault, Hitler's pogrom was born out of this union of eugenics and racism. In the transition from one regime to the other, there is involved-lapping of different forms of power, and Foucault says we must conceptualize the deployment of sexuality based on the techniques of power that are contemporary with it (Scott 1996).

So he draws our attention to the significance of Sade and the first Eugenics being *contemporaries* with the transition from *sanguinity* to *sexuality* (Foucault 1990). And it happened to have been Sade who carried the exhaustive analysis of sex over into the mechanisms of the old power of Sovereignty, thus endowing it with the ancient but fully maintained prestige of blood. For Sade, sex, of itself, does not have any norm or intrinsic rule that might be formulated from its own nature; but it is subject to the unrestricted law of power which itself knows no other law but its own, and, which if the disciple is capable of becoming unique and naked sovereignty: an unlimited right of all-powerful monstrosity. Freud's more lawful explication of sex as *instinct* raises afresh the notion of sex as a natural reality. Seen in this way Sex is a historical constant, the backdrop against which the changes of culture take place. But according to Foucault, sex is not an extra-discursive reality any more than is sexuality. It is precisely this idea of sex in its self' that Foucault says we cannot accept without examination (Foucault 1990).

Sex is the creation of Sexuality, says Foucault, and not the other way round. The deployment of sexuality permits the techniques of power to invest in life. The fictitious point of sex, itself marked by that deployment, exerts enough charm on everyone for them to accept hearing the grumble of death within it. Sex does turn out say Foucault to be another illusion of depth. So if the deployment of sexuality is to be resisted, it cannot be by the set of freeing sex to take its natural course, but rather by championing the multiplicity of pleasures and the body as the site of these pleasures. The notion of repression is misleading in two manners: first, that sex has been silenced or prohibited –when the true effects of sexuality had been to turn desire into discourse and to incite sexual acts. Second, that sex should not be understood as a natural force which having been penned up by taboos and restrictions, needs, therefore, to be liberated. Rather our pleasures have been dominated by a power that seeks to manipulate them for its own ends.

Is Foucault proposing a program by this? Whatever else he might be doing, Foucault seems to me to be saying that this domination *cannot* be resisted unless sex and sexuality are understood as cultural *constructs* of the modern *episteme* and that the domain they cover has been *constituted* in different terms in other areas and cultures. If I understand Foucault well, these raises a series of questions that I think have some practical relevance to the modern world. After all, Foucault was someone whose thoughts nearly always point to social and political implications. The first question would be something like this: Is the phenomenon of social change possible in a 'system' or web of power relations as described by Foucault? Would Foucault find any legitimacy in movements of liberation for instance in the third-world countries, whether from economic or political domination? How would Foucault understand the feminist agenda today as a movement? For I think that no matter the differences and varieties found in the feminist spectrum today are all basically founded upon an

axiomatic principle: that of gender-based identity seeking fulfillment as liberation from domination. Does the notion of such freedom as subjective freedom find a niche in Foucault's understandings of power relations? How could such an object of study exist as anterior to, but constructed within discourse?

## **A HERMENEUTICS OF THE DISPERSED SUBJECT: HEIDEGGER, GADAMER, KOGLER AND FOUCAULT**

I agree with Prado and Miller that Foucault's originality was wrapped up with his Heideggerian ambition to think '*unthought*' and a Nietzschean interest in the *daimonic*'. His goal was to come to terms with Nietzschean question; how did I become what I am? And why do I suffer from being what I am? (Prado 2018) Can Foucault's claim of the primacy of discursive formation in the determination of non-discursive or socioeconomic experience be successfully maintained without a certain amount of ambiguity- or even in some points, contradiction?

In a footnote to chapter 6 of his work: *The Power of Dialogue*, Kogler quotes from Axel Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*:

What is at issue in the struggle of blacks in the united state, or the struggles of women, homosexuals, and non-European cultures and individuals, is the *concrete recognition* of these people; that is to say, they want their uniqueness, their cultural heritage, to be valued and respected in the particular, and not, as a merely abstract individual, to be admitted into culturally predetermined spheres of "equalities"- and that after centuries of oppression. This objective requires a post-conventional identity as a necessary precondition (which goes unnoticed), though such an identity is not a *sufficient* condition here; instead, this objective calls for a post-conventional morality or post-traditional ethics, which nevertheless recognizes and values the traditional substance of the other (Kögler 1999, p. 65).

Instead of seeking to delineate "that solid and global kind of domination that one person exercise over others, or one group over another," the sort of domination that is at the level of meaningful, Foucault observes the action of discourse behind the façade of signifiers and is concerned with power at its extremities, in ultimate destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary... the point surmounts the rule of right which organize and delimit it. And extends itself beyond them (Foucault 1990). This is the domain where power is organized into effective strategies that take an immediate grip over bodies; it is the distinction in which power operates in a way that frequently contradicts the meaning given off by the façade of discourse may seem to be saying.

In order to make possible the sort of inversion that Foucault asks, paradigms must be used to bolster traditional analyses of power, such as the *violence-ideology opposition*, *the metaphor of property*, *the model of the contract*, or *of conquest* be all abandoned (Foucault 2007). Against traditional and classical thought, Foucault holds



that ‘power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, nor something that one holds onto, or allows to slip away Foucault 1990). As a result, if one makes use of the paradigm of *violence-ideology* opposition to explain power relations, it brings with it a piece of whole metaphysical baggage of the *subject*. For ideology presupposes a human subject in the pattern given by classical philosophy. A subject that is endowed with consciousness which power then take hold of and act upon (Foucault 1990). Foucault, therefore, eliminates the *subject* as conscious and *active* participants from the most fundamental strategies of power. It is this that prompts Sartre to say that Foucault’s enterprise is ideological in nature, and not firmly rooted in tradition that Foucault set out to deny history but failed to surpass Marx (Sartre 1994). It is the opinion of Sartre that the thought of Foucault could be simply inscribed as the *suppression* of Marxism. Henri Lefebvre too thought that Foucault’s *system* (if it was one) abandoned the traditional support of discourse, and as such he did not expect it to have sway for long before tottering (Lourau 1967). Lefebvre poses a question that resonates in accord with my puzzlement: “who is speaking in this philosophical discourse, in this *system*? We do not know anymore, it isn’t God (he is dead), nor Man (a fiction, a representation), nor the individual (another fiction, an illusion of subjectivity), nor of course, ‘I,’ nor Foucault. Who is speaking? It is they [*on*]. There is language. The system. Since there is signification and meaning only inside the system, the system has no meaning... through all these discourses and these ‘rigorous writings,’ the system converse with itself about itself (Domenach 1967). The subject has evaporated into thin air and with it the anchorage of the being of meaning. In the same vein, Kogler faults Foucault’s attempt to ourselves based on discourse analysis rather than Hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics for Kogler spells “the term for a consciousness that recognizes that interpretive understanding must proceed from one’s own preunderstanding. Hence, [his]... claim [is] that discourse analysis can be defended and made strong only first clarifying how such analysis is linked to our own preunderstanding” ((Kögler 1999, p. 196) Kogler believes Foucault to have “committed a category mistake in his attempts to resolve a genuinely *methodological* problem (namely, how the meaning of other symbol systems can be disclosed) by introducing *subject-free theories* about language or statements (in the sense of the priority of structure or the statement over against meaning)” (Kögler 1999, p. 196). Kogler favors ‘an interpretive theory that is defined through linguistic ontology’ over and above a psychologistic hermeneutics. And for this, he turns to none other than the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer. Kogler’s choice of Gadamer rests on the criteria that his hermeneutics ‘pursues not so much a subject-or science-related methodology but analysis of the universal and methodically relevant *preunderstanding*’ ((Kögler 1999) which happens also to be very same enigma with which Foucault saw himself tackling, albeit fruitlessly, with the baggage of his own structuralist background. Kogler’s project seems to be an

attempt to reconcile ‘the ineluctability of preunderstanding with a distanced’ and distancing interpretive praxis.’ The problem posed by Kogler is "how are we to effect this confrontational encounter with another’s meaning, which must at the same time be disclosed from our own meaning context? (Kögler 1999).

Gadamer explicitly takes as the foundation and starting point of his analysis of ‘historical consciousness’ Heidegger’s analysis of the structure of understanding and of the intrinsic historicity of human existence. By the pre-structure of understanding, Heidegger means that we understand a given text, matter, or situation, not with an empty consciousness temporarily filled with the present situation but rather because we hold in our understanding, and bring into play a preliminary intention with regard to the situation, an already established way of seeing, and certain ideational "preconceptions." There is no pure seeing and an understanding of history without reference to the presence. History is seen and understood only and through a consciousness standing in the present. The present is however seen and understood through the intentions, ways of seeing, and preconceptions bequeathed from the past. Gadamer’s hermeneutics and critiques of historical consciousness assert that the past is not like a pile of facts- ‘Archive’ (‘ala Foucault?) which can be made an object of consciousness, but rather is a stream in which we move and participate, in every act of understanding. Tradition then is not over against us but something in which we stand and through which we exist; for the most part it is so transparent a medium that it is invisible to us- as invisible as water to fish. According to Kogler,

The methodological approach of a pure description of discursive events with the statement as the basic element of discourse has fatal ontological consequences ... by introducing the statement as the ontological basic element of a methodological committed to the externalistic description meaning systems, Foucault becomes entangled in a difficulty: he uncouples symbol system, as completely autarchic order, from any socially constituted relation to meaning and is thus forced to conceive such systems as self-engendering. Discourse becomes its own source of the constitution; at the same time, however, Foucault determines discourse as rule systems (Foucault 1990, p. 193). Kogler insists that “[i]f [Foucault] maintains both theses at once, he presupposes the thoroughly untenable claim that these rules determine their application” (Kögler 1999, p. 193).

## **CONCLUSION**

To my mind, however, the genius of Foucault lies in his problematizing the realm of the intellect by questioning the very possibility of understanding our historical and philosophical reality. In this, his target was the sacred institutions of history and philosophy. Foucault meant to demystify the relation between them by establishing the condition of another history, in which the concept of the event is preserved, but in which events affect concept and not men (Mahon 1992). It could be

said that his thought is an adequate expression [perhaps] of a realization characterizing modern man as a being who knows that "his truth may very well be situated outside of him, and that his self, with all its resistances and illusions, denies this truth" (Racevskis, K. (1983, p. 143) Foucault's distinction between a *cogito* and an "unthought" leads to a thought of the Other and makes manifest the primacy of the unconscious over the conscious, of the system over the event, of the unthought over thought. Seen in this light, Foucault's thought is not as such *irrational* but as that it constitutes a revolt against reason; or better still, against the dominant and sole oppressive voice of reason.

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