

FOUCAULT'S ATTACK ON SEX-DESIRE

Ladelle McWhorter

At the end of *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, Michel Foucault writes, "The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures."¹ This assertion has two parts—a rejection of desire and an affirmation of bodies and pleasures as rallying points for radical politics; most readers ignore the first while rejecting the second. Recently, though, Elizabeth Grosz has addressed both parts of Foucault's assertion in a way that focuses the issues I will address here. After quoting the statement quoted above, Grosz writes:

It is unclear to me what this could possibly mean: is it that bodies and pleasures are somehow outside the deployment of sexuality? Or are they neuralgic points within the deployment of sexuality that may be strategically useful in any challenge to the current nexus of desire-knowledge-power? Why are bodies and pleasures a source of subversion in a way that sex and desire are not?²

Grosz's questions point to the heart of Foucault's work and suggest the direction in which an answer lies, the direction Foucault in fact takes: There are significant genealogical and therefore strategic differences between desire on the one hand and bodies and pleasures on the other. I will explicate the differences and argue that Foucault is right to assert the strategic superiority of bodies and pleasures above desire—not because bodies and pleasures are unproblematic but because desire is so very problematic and dangerous given its place in structures of normalization and biopower.

Foucault's death put a premature end to his sexuality series, but the volumes promised in the first book never would have materialized anyway. The later volumes that were published completely reorient the study. In those two volumes, Foucault turns to Greece and Rome and to the place of sexual practices within dietary regimes and games of self-mastery. There are many reasons for this shift, but the one Foucault articulates most clearly and simply is this:

It seemed to me that one could not very well ana-

lyze the formation and development of the experience of sexuality from the eighteenth century onward, without doing a historical and critical study dealing with desire and the desiring subject. . . . The idea was to investigate how individuals were led to practice, on themselves and on others, a hermeneutics of desire. . . . In order to understand how the modern individual could experience himself as a subject of a "sexuality," it was essential first to determine how, for centuries, Western man had been brought to recognize himself as a subject of desire.³

Here desiring subjectivity and sexual subjectivity are crucially connected. Desiring subjectivity is one historical condition for sexual subjectivity's emergence, and sexual subjectivity, developing within networks of biopower, serves as both an anchor for sexuality's deployment and an intersection between biopower and truth. Deployment of sexuality in the absence of sexual subjectivity has become unimaginable.

Moreover, desire and sexuality's deployments are more than merely historically entangled, and the conditioning relation runs both ways. In current deployments, discourses of desire thoroughly permeate and are thoroughly permeated by normalizing sexual discourses. Thus, sexual subjectivity and desiring subjectivity are now likewise inextricable. This mutual reinforcement between desire and sexuality will be taken up again momentarily. First, however, to provide some grounding for claims I will later make, I will reconstruct Foucault's genealogy of "desiring man."

In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault describes a way of being human that did not include an experience of being, fundamentally, a subject of desire. For the elite of classical Greece, desire was merely one element in a dynamic ensemble that also included pleasure and act. These three were inseparable and equally important. Desire was the longing that comes only after pleasure is known and when memory of pleasure is invoked through representation of acts in which it is immanent; desire is neither logically nor chronologically prior to the pleasurable acts we might

see as its satisfaction.⁴ The work of the ethical subject, then, did not focus specifically on desire but rather on this ensemble, the *aphrodisia*, and consisted of learning to administer it so as to be respected in the polis and fit to lead, so as to shape a beautiful life.

Between the times of Socrates and Epictetus, ethical problematizations shifted. Foucault describes both continuities and differences in *The Care of the Self*.⁵ Now, at the center of the art of existence is the cultivation of the self, a life-long enterprise rather than, as formerly in Greece, the work of young adulthood. As the self comes to be seen as fragile and vulnerable, care of the body becomes paramount and all that might unbalance it suspect. Accordingly, Foucault asserts, "there was greater apprehension concerning the sexual pleasures, more attention given to the relation that one might have with them. In a word, there was a more intense problematization of the *aphrodisia*" (HS3, 39; SS, 53). This intensification led to what might be seen as greater sexual austerity in light of a more minute articulation of the body's more and less healthy states. This problematization of bodily health, in turn, was closely connected with two other major developments—a quasi-universal account of health against which one might judge oneself and a concern with the fragile body/self's relations with (its dependence upon and independence from) other people.

In Rome there is no desiring subject, but there is a subjectivity that looks more familiar than the subject of *aphrodisia* did. Sexual pleasure is increasingly shunned as a danger, while acts increasingly are measured against a common "reason" or "nature." Of the classical Greek ensemble pleasure-act-desire, then, what remains by the end of the imperial Roman period still to be elaborated in its distinctiveness is desire.

Foucault died before finishing his manuscripts on Christian morality and the sixteenth century.⁶ There are only brief studies and scattered comments available, so one can only speculate on what would fill the gap between Rome and the eighteenth century.⁷ Nevertheless, this much is clear: The subject of desire comes into existence only after Christianity is established. Only then do people come to understand themselves fundamentally as desiring beings and their ethical work as the interpretation, confession, and eradication of sensual desires. Action is now

relegated to the realm of obedience. Pleasure, Foucault jokes, no longer exists; it occupies no significant ethico-theoretical space and is mentioned only to be dismissed.⁸ Desire becomes paramount, for it is through a hermeneutics of desire that one seeks to expose and reverse the Fall into disobedience and deathliness.

Many assume that Christianity sought complete mortification of the body, but this was not the case. Bodily functions themselves were not slated for eradication; they were inevitable. What was to be eradicated were the desires that one might feel in one's soul in association with those functions. Foucault quotes Cassian:

We have to repress the reactions in our minds and the emotions of our bodies until the flesh can satisfy the demands of nature without giving rise to any pleasurable feelings, getting rid of the excess of our bodily humors without any unhealthy urges and without having to plunge back into the battle for our chastity.⁹

The issue is not mortification of the body, but command of the soul, elimination of those movements the soul usually experiences in response to bodily functions. Nocturnal emissions, e.g., will not cease, but they need not jeopardize the monk's chastity if he does not allow pleasures or desires for intercourse to accompany them.

A monk's battle for chastity extended to control over his dream life. Impure dreams are a sign of hidden lust, says Cassian, "a sign of the corruption that festers within, and not just a product of the night. Buried in the depth of the soul, the corruption has come to the surface during sleep, revealing the hidden fever of passions with which we have become infected by glutting ourselves all day long on unhealthy emotions."¹⁰ Awake, one might convince oneself that one was pure, but in dreams the truth will out; in dreams the soul's true state reveals itself.

Cassian's fifth century advice and admonitions to monks are still far removed from medieval Christianity's codes and practices, but in his writings we see what is to come. Exactly how Foucault would have traced the transformations of Christian ascetic practices through the next several centuries is unknowable, but we do know that the Council of Trent constitutes in his view a turning point. The Council laid down detailed procedures for examination and purification of the clergy, but, more importantly for Foucault's

work, these techniques were then imposed on the laity,¹¹ and the ideal of purity came to be applied to married people as well as celibate ones. After Trent, the issue for Christians was not so much intercourse itself as the movements of the soul its performance might provoke. What was at issue was not the act but the motives for committing it. What was problematized was desire.

This developing ascetic discourse separates soul and flesh. Flesh will be flesh, but Christians must not allow the mechanics of flesh to give rise to impure thoughts. This is not yet the discourse Foucault calls sexuality. In Christianity, one constitutes oneself as a desiring subject only to forfeit oneself so constituted. The desiring subject is transient; the self is identified only to be overcome. Manifestation of desire in Christian confession, then, is a prelude to exorcism; it is not the bringing to light of a permanent truth of the self that one must accept and perhaps even cherish. A Christian is a subject of desire, but not yet a subject of sexuality.

Sexuality, Foucault asserts, emerges in the eighteenth century.¹² From that point on, "techniques of verbalization" refined through the Christian period are "reinserted in a different context by the so-called human sciences in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self."¹³ This is the beginning of the constitution of the sexual subject, a slow process requiring decades of extension and consolidation before producing selves familiar to us (HS1, 116–18; VS, 153–56). The eighteenth century concerns itself primarily with the medicalization of the bourgeois family, infant mortality, and masturbation among schoolboys. Around 1800, hysteria takes the stage, and along with it the new century focuses upon masturbation among girls and then perverse sexualities.¹⁴ Just before mid-century authorities and charitable organizations extended such discourses to the lower classes. Sexuality's development took more than a hundred years, as did the development of sexual subjectivity within it. Its culminating point, Foucault suggests, occurred with the emergence of psychoanalysis and its "procedures that set sex and truth in relation. In our time, there isn't a single one of the discourses on sexuality which isn't, in one way or another, oriented in relation to that of psychoanalysis."¹⁵

How does desiring subjectivity, for whom what is problematized is the flesh, give way to sexual subjectivity, for whom what is problema-

tized is sex? Among the many significant shifts I suggest two: (1) the secularization of the knowing subject, beginning with Descartes, and (2) the relatively rapid constitution, within the multifarious discourses of sexuality in the nineteenth century, of the epistemic object "sex."

1) Descartes offers a methodology of knowing intended to replace the one taught in the schools. His geometric method is, unlike the scholastic syllogistic method, non-hermeneutic; though he uses the old locution, he does not treat the natural world as a book to be deciphered. Truth is not to be sought through esoteric practices, and the would-be knower need not undergo purification. One need only discipline oneself to the evidence available to any subject. "The relationship to the self no longer needs to be ascetic to get into relation to the truth. . . . Thus I can be immoral and know the truth."¹⁶ Anyone can be a subject of knowledge.

This knowing subject does not replace the desiring subject; they coexist, but not without consequences. For the Christian subject of desire, the self is to be renounced; not so for the secular subject of knowledge. For the latter, the self, as site and foundation of knowledge, is to be disciplined, not foregone. The moment of self-renunciation recedes. Meanwhile, the desiring subject remains caught up in and identified by its desire.

2) In the eighteenth century, with its nationalistic concerns, the discourse of the flesh diminishes in importance in comparison to a welter of new issues. What resources against our enemies might we expect from our populations? How can we organize populations to produce good soldiers, laborers, merchants? How can we keep the numbers of sick and idle down? These issues led to new practices like population surveys, adaptation of scheduling techniques from monastic settings for use in secular contexts, studies of procreative and contraceptive practices, campaigns to insure maternal health, and development of disciplinary techniques that treated bodies like machines to be retooled. Many of these innovations seem to herald a new concern with sexuality. However, Foucault warns, we must not impose a unifying conceptual framework upon these disparate innovations. The various discourses and techniques emerging early in the nineteenth century are basically ad hoc responses to local administrative problems. They have no unifying principle of their own. Not until the

epistemic object “sex” emerges do they come to constitute a unified domain.

The notion of “sex” made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere. . . . Further, presenting itself in a unitary fashion . . . it was able to mark the line of contact between a knowledge of human sexuality and the biological sciences of reproduction; thus, without really borrowing anything from these sciences, excepting a few doubtful analogies, the knowledge of sexuality gained through proximity a guarantee of quasi-scientificity; but by virtue of this same proximity, some of the contents of biology and physiology were able to serve as a principle of normality for human sexuality. (HS1, 154–55; VS, 204)

The object to be investigated—discovered, understood, managed—within these heretofore disparate disciplines is now sex—as it manifests itself and develops in the lives of the individuals and populations that constitute a nation. When sex emerges as an epistemic object, it is posited as a natural phenomenon, a primary aspect of organic life affecting us all. By the nineteenth century, human bodies are understood as temporally functional systems rather than as machines identified by the ways their parts stand in spatial relation to one another. It is this notion of the temporality of organic functioning that makes possible “normalization.” In the late eighteenth century, disciplinarians like Guibert suggested that bodies resisted discipline because they had some sort of “natural” predisposition to develop in contrary ways.¹⁷ Opposition to administrative order was not disorder but counter-order. Eventually, the idea that there existed natural counter-orders that could be investigated and manipulated won popular and scientific support. Sex is the name for one such counter-order, for what governs the body’s refusal to abide by disciplinary command, the name for an order that is the body’s natural developmental trajectory. By mid-nineteenth century, to get control of populations, normalizing disciplinarians seek to track the developmental patterns that occur in individuals under the sign of sex. Hence the great concern after about 1840 with perversion; like teratologists who investigated fetal abnormalities in order to delineate and influence the stages of normal fetal

growth, sexologists investigated sexual abnormalities in order to delineate the stages of normal sexual development—thereby to harness, shape, and use it for whatever ends they chose. Sex is the name and the principle of organization for an epistemically accessible developmental domain.

It also makes possible a reconciliation between the subjects of knowledge and desire. Foucault writes:

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, to formulate it in truth. It constituted “sex” itself as something desirable. And it is this desirability of sex that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and power. (HS1, 156–57; VS 207)

Sex is the object of both knowledge and desire. Because we desire sex—because we are driven toward it and therefore our development is governed by it—sex is something we must understand. Because the power of sex is most clearly manifested in the way it governs development of desire, desire is the key to knowledge of it. Hence we reactivate hermeneutic discourses of desire, now not in order to eradicate desire and sacrifice the desiring subject but in order to see through desire to that which it lacks and to which that lack always points: sex. Sexuality is the normalized correlate of desire. Sexual subjectivity is the normalized child of the subject of desire.

What of Foucault’s assertion and Grosz’s interrogation of it? Why might bodies and pleasures make better rallying points for counterattack than sex and desire? The answer should be obvious. Sex is the linchpin of sexuality; desire is sex-desire. The desiring subject, thoroughly normalized, is the sexual subject. Affirmation of desire, even in the plural, will do nothing to undermine the *dispositif de sexualité*.

We cannot invent ex nihilo some other way to think or be. But there are resources within our culture and history that might serve us at least temporarily in our efforts to move away from what we are and to create something new. Elsewhere I have discussed the potential that lies in rethinking bodies;¹⁸ here I will focus only on Foucault’s interest in pleasures as possible rallying points.

Pleasure is no less historical than desire, and it has played some role in the history of sexual subjectivity. There are and frequently have been discourses of pleasure and cultivation of pleasures and pleasurable practices. Foucault was witness to and probably a participant in several such experiments toward the end of his life. A survey of the literature on s/m shows—unless one is terribly biased—that some participants in that movement are engaged in practices designed to intensify bodily sensation, to cultivate new possibilities for pleasure, much as one might cultivate one's ability to enjoy fine wines, coffees, or spices. Similarly, some writings concerning drug experimentation reveal a concern with intensification and expansion of physical sensation. Pleasure does exist in our society.

However, left on the margins of the discourse of the flesh and therefore on the margins of discourses of sexuality, pleasure has not been as rig-

orously normalized as desire has been. It has resisted quantification and so is not easily absorbed into sciences that rely on statistically generated norms. It has not been seen as inherently developmental and, as a mere inconstant by-product of desire and act, it has not been central to our understanding of our development as sexual beings. None of this makes pleasure a safe feature of existence to cling to, but the dangers associated with cultivation of pleasure as a possible counter to sexuality are far less than the dangers of yet another elaboration upon desire.

We are not subjects of pleasure, but of desire. If the point "is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are,"¹⁹ pleasure stands at the edge of our experience as a door slightly ajar through which, with effort, we might depart and become something of which we have not yet dreamed. There might be other doors, but—to answer Grosz directly—desire is not one of them.

ENDNOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 157. This passage occurs in the French text—*La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1976)—on p. 208. All further references to this work will be given in the body of the text as HS1 and page number, followed by VS and page number.
2. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 155–56.
3. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure, The History of Sexuality*, volume 2, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 5–6. These passages occur in the French text—*L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984)—on pp. 11–12. Further references to this work will occur in the body of the text as HS2 and page number, followed by UP and page number.
4. In addition to HS2, especially pp. 44–45, see also Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 234.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985), see especially pp. 44ff. See in the French text—*Le souci de soi* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984)—pp. 59ff. Further references to this work will occur in the body of the text as HS3 and page number, followed by SS and page number.
6. He mentions the existence of this text in "On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 231.
7. Some of those studies include: Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton, eds., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 16–49, and "The Battle for Chastity," in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 227–41. Interviews containing interesting comments on this subject include: "The Return of Morality" and "The Concern for Truth," both in Kritzman, pp. 242–54 and 255–67 respectively, and "On the Genealogy of Ethics."
8. He makes this point twice in "On the Genealogy of Ethics." On p. 234 he claims that in our day everyone "explains that what is important is desire, and pleasure is nothing at all." Then again on p. 243 he says, "I could say that the modern 'formula' is desire, which is theoretically underlined and practically accepted, since you have to liberate your own desire. Acts are not very important, and pleasure—nobody know [sic] what it is!" In *The Use of Pleasure*, he points to an "'elision' of pleasure (a moral devaluation through the injunction given in the preaching of the Christian clergy against the pursuit of sensual pleasure as a goal of sexual practice; a theoretical devaluation shown by the extreme difficulty of finding a place for pleasure in the conception

- of sexuality)" (HS2, 42; UP, 51–52).
9. Quoted in Michel Foucault, "The Battle for Chastity," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, pp. 237–38.
 10. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 237.
 11. For some discussion of the Council of Trent, see Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 200.
 12. Foucault, "Confession of the Flesh," p. 211: "We have had sexuality since the eighteenth century, and sex since the nineteenth. What we had before that was no doubt the flesh."
 13. Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," p. 49.
 14. For these dates, see Foucault, "Power and Sex," in *Power/Knowledge*, especially p. 115, and "Confession of the Flesh," especially pp. 217 and 221.
 15. Foucault, "Confession of the Flesh," p. 219.
 16. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 252.
 17. For Foucault's discussion of the emergence of "the natural body" as a category within disciplinary discourses, see *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 155–56, or *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975), pp. 157–58. See for elaboration my article "Foucaults Herculine Barbin en de strategie van verdubbelte deviance," *Krisis* number 57 (December 1994): 10–25 and my article "Foucault's Genealogy of Homosexuality," in *Bulletin de la Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française*, 6 (Spring, 1994): 51–52.
 18. See "Foucaults Herculine Barbin en de strategie van verdubbelte deviance."
 19. Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, p. 216.

University of Richmond, Richmond, VA 23173