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Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization

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Bodies and Pleasures

Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization

Ladelle McWhorter

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ladelle McWhorter", is written diagonally across the page. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line underneath it.

Indiana University Press

B L O O M I N G T O N A N D I N D I A N A P O L I S

INTRODUCTION

FOUCAULT'S IMPACT: CHALLENGES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Michel Foucault's work gripped me from the very first encounter I had with it as a first-year graduate student back in 1982. Though at the time I could not explain why, I knew immediately that that work embodied a philosophical promise nothing else I had studied before had ever held out to me. Where the work of other philosophers of history and other social critics and theorists had seemed to falter or stall, Foucault's work pushed on, and both pushed and lured me on. I wasn't always (or even usually) sure where I was going, but I was sure from the beginning that this undertaking—reading and thinking with and coming to understand the work of Michel Foucault—would be rewarding in itself, no matter where the path might end. Fifteen years of intense effort later, I'm more convinced than ever of that endeavor's worth.

Not all of Foucault's readers share my enthusiasm. In fact, a great many are positively condemnatory. A lot is at stake, for Foucault does violence to many of our most cherished philosophical traditions and places in question or de-centers a number of our most basic epistemological, moral, and politico-theoretical assumptions. That violence scares some people, excites others, and challenges us all. It's no surprise, then, that Foucault's methods and claims have always been and still are extremely controversial. What is surprising is how long it has taken for most North American scholars to make any real effort to come to grips with Foucault and grapple with the challenges that his writings put forth. In the early 1980s, despite the fact that Foucault had already made several trips to the U.S. to lecture, most of his major works were available in English, and several commentaries were already on the market, North Americans tended to ignore him or dismiss or denounce his ideas without much thought. Serious scholars reserved their energy for study of other issues and texts.¹ A few renegades read and liked the work, and some scholarly attention did come to focus on it. But those first few friendly forays didn't win Foucault many allies; in fact, they won him enemies, because some very serious scholars then felt compelled to persuade the still silent majority not to take Foucault any more seriously than they already did. Often, when even well-known and highly respected intellectuals wrote on Foucault's work, their tone was

hostile and their scholarship less than exemplary. Commentary that proclaimed itself to be thoughtful evaluation often amounted to little more than Francophobic invective, or just plain derision. As late as 1994, Alan Hunt and Gary Wickham noted in the opening paragraphs of their book *Foucault and Law*, "The work of Michel Foucault continues to excite controversy. Passions often run high; his name still produces more partisanship than dispassionate evaluation."² The truth is that Foucault's fairly radical philosophical assertions and his innovative interpretations of the histories of social and governmental institutions just were not taken very seriously (except as an irrational threat) by intellectuals in the U.S. and Canada, even by those—like critics Charles Taylor, Peter Dews, and Michael Walzer—who might be characterized as leftists.

By the time of Foucault's death in June of 1984, there had emerged a rather large contingent of well-credentialed left-leaning thinkers—philosophers, sociologists, historians—who expressed suspicion of and even contempt for his work and who expended no small amount of energy to warn the less wary away from it. Most—but by no means all—were grounded in Marxist theory (which Foucault critiques and in many respects attempts to undermine³) and some, like Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser, had intellectual ties to the Frankfurt School. Their message was, roughly, this: Don't let Foucault fool you; beneath his radical pronouncements and provocative exposés there lies only a gnawing nihilism, a dissipating quietism, a throwing up of hands. Feminists couched the risks in more explicitly carnal terms: Foucault's work may look sexy, girls, but don't let yourself be seduced.⁴ In the vocal majority's appraisals, feminist and non-feminist alike, the note of caution sounded was much the same. Foucault is insidious, a glamorous con artist, a human wolf in sheep's clothing, a sort of Franco-Trojan horse designed and thrust among us by a neoconservative backlash—in sum, he is a dissembler who threatens to corrupt. Pull away the rousing rhetoric, the high-fashioned Gallic glitz, and what you will find first of all is . . . nothing, nothing new, nothing useful, nothing very interesting. There is no theory, no program, and no basis for the creation of any such thing. But second, and far worse, what little substance Foucault *does* offer is downright dangerous; he launches a vicious attack on everything that might serve as a foundation for progressive politics, justice, liberation, or any kind of social reform. Feminist theorist Toril Moi's warning is not atypical; she asserts, "If we capitulate to Foucault's analysis, we will find ourselves caught up in a sado-masochistic spiral of power and resistance which, circling endlessly in heterogeneous movement, creates a space in which it will be quite impossible convinc-

ingly to argue that women under patriarchy constitute an oppressed group, let alone develop a theory of their liberation."⁵ So, it was widely asserted, Foucault's work is not merely a waste of time; it is actually political poison. Not only will it not help us to do the political and social work we need to do, but it will actually prevent us from doing what we need to do. In fact, given its mesmerizing scintillations, it may even prevent us from *seeing* what we need to do. Michel Foucault's work is dangerous indeed, and all the more so for its superficial radical appeal—for what Michael Walzer terms its "infantile leftism" and Richard Rorty once called its "self-indulgent radical chic."⁶

By mid-decade there were a few articles in print defending Foucault against some of the standard criticisms or at least suggesting that some of his work had its positive political uses.⁷ But not one of those essays ever matched in passion and intensity the denunciations of a Michael Walzer or a Toril Moi. Defenses and sympathetic appraisals of Foucault at the time were almost always provisional and qualified. Most focused on his work's value for limited critical projects within particular political movements, usually emphasizing its character as a "tool-box" rather than its power to generate or incite political or social movements or its value for existing movements as they define their long-range goals. And virtually none of those essays simply explored the work for its own sake as philosophical experimentation. Hence, it appeared, Foucault's alleged attempt at seduction had failed. Despite fearful predictions, no newly deflowered, Foucault-inseminated zealots of nihilism appeared on the political horizon. It seemed that the warnings had worked.

And yet, while Rorty, Walzer, Moi, Dews, Taylor, Fraser,⁸ and countless others offered warnings to activists not to waste their time getting sidetracked by theories that in the end would be useless to them, not to get seduced, not to get mired in Foucault's nihilistic muck, scores of gay bookstores quietly stocked and sold Foucault's books. While relatively mainstream philosophers, historians, and political theorists insisted that Foucault's work could never form the basis for or even aid any successful political movement, queer readers were making Foucault a part of their intellectual lives. And, given the extremely politically ramified conditions under which non-heterosexual people live, making Foucault a part of their intellectual lives usually meant making him a part of their political lives. David Halperin goes so far as to claim that Foucault "is to contemporary AIDS activists as Norman O. Brown or Herbert Marcuse was to student radicals of the New Left."⁹ Most of those readers never thought to seek out a professional political theorist to help them decide whether Foucault had something valuable to say. They just read Foucault. Later, when some of them stumbled upon the

debate of the early 1980s with its reiterated cautionary message, rather than try to respond and explain to the debaters why they held the work in relatively high esteem, they just kept reading Foucault.

From late 1982 on, I was one of those diligent but relatively reticent readers. For at least a couple of years I devoured Foucault's books, essays, and interviews with a sense of excitement that far outstripped my ability to describe or explain, while blissfully unaware that anyone was seriously critiquing the works or attacking Foucault for his alleged implicit or explicit political theories. Later, even after I ascended into the rarified atmosphere of professional philosophy in 1986¹⁰ and began producing work that took its heading from Foucault, I tried to avoid engaging with professional colleagues in theoretical debate about his works' political value, positive or negative. I didn't feel deeply compelled to make a case for Foucault over and against any of the standard Anglo and Germanic political criticisms or to justify my interest in and use of his work to people who took those criticisms seriously. In fact, I don't think I could have justified it to them or anyone else, since the process of reading it was changing me in some fundamental ways such that my own standards for evaluating texts and my own conceptions of philosophical significance and truth were undergoing massive and almost constant revision. I saw little to gain from engaging with my professional elders in debate over the merits of works I had not mastered but that were, in effect, slowly mastering me.

I was young then and suffered from the restlessness of youth, which may account for why I found all those technical philosophical evaluations of Foucault's work so very tedious. But there was more to it than my own intellectual impatience. It seemed to me that most of the people who condemned Foucault did not really want to hear about his works' merits, their strengths, the possibilities that they opened up. It sometimes even seemed that none of Foucault's critics had ever picked up any of the books that I had read. Their perspectives on the work and on the issues the work raises were almost totally alien to me. What could they possibly have to say that would interest me, then? The liberal theorists with their delusions of autonomy bored me; the self-satisfaction of both the British and North American socialists tended to get on my nerves; most boring, irritating, and seemingly irrelevant of all were Habermas' tortured and contorted critiques of Foucault, which became only marginally more intelligible when reiterated by his American followers.¹¹ The Foucault those people were generating so much heat talking about was almost unrecognizable to me. To enter the debate as it was then unfolding would have required that I bend the trajectory of my own thinking and postpone reaching my own goals in order to take

into account the categories and terminologies of people who seemed to share virtually none of my political, social, or philosophical concerns and who, I thought, did not evince any understanding of the political acts that Foucault's writings enable and in fact constitute. On the few occasions when I did venture to assert the political value or defend some strategic use of Foucault's analyses, my writing always seemed stiff, flattened, tremendously awkward, as if a Foucaultian *apologia* were a mutant literary life-form whose survival was, as physicians say, contraindicated. I should have known better than to try.

It is 1998. I am older and wiser, more patient and sedate.¹² Now, though I have come to have much more respect for Foucault's critics than I did in earlier years, I do know better than to try to offer an *apologia*. What follows is not a defense of Foucault. Although along the way I'll offer arguments against the standard criticisms of his work, my primary purpose is not to prove to anyone that Foucault's philosophical positions are the true and right ones. Rather than questions about the logic of his argumentation or the accuracy of his reportage or even of the works' political utility or danger, what I am interested in here is the question of what has kept someone like me reading Foucault's work for the last fifteen years, the question of how it has been able to push me in the directions I have gone both philosophically and politically, the question of how that work has been able to excite, stimulate, enliven, and empower me for the greater part of my adult life. I am not so interested, then, in what his works have to say, although what they have to say is crucial to my study; instead, I am most interested in what they tend to do.

This "doing" of the texts, the manifestations of their potency, occurs at two analytically distinguishable levels: the level of the thinking, feeling individual and the level of the political situation. At the level of the individual, I'm interested in how the works—especially the last five books: *Discipline and Punish*, *The History of Sexuality* (volumes 1, 2, and 3), and *Herculine Barbin*—operate as a discipline, as an *askesis*, an exercise of thinking that transforms its reader. (Since the reader I'm best acquainted with is me, the processes of transformation that I have undergone during that fifteen years will serve as a sixth primary "text" here.) At the level of the political situation, I'm interested in how those works operate to open possibilities, how they transform the reader's world, how they interfere with heterosexist business as usual. Clearly these two levels are only analytically, not ontologically, distinct; reader and world are not really separable. If one changes, they both do. It might be better, then, to state my central interest this way: I'm interested in how Foucault's works operate to transform various politically charged

sites, not the least of which is the site of the act of reading itself, the politically complicated, multiply valenced site that is the reader. I'm interested, then, in what one might call, after Nietzsche, the *undergoing* of Foucault's texts and in particular the undergoing that occurs when the reader in question is—as I am—a non-heterosexual person formed by and living within a world that defines her in her being, in her very truth, as deviant and criminal and sick; that daily undermines, through both formal and informal means, her well-being; and that with a banal but unremitting regularity openly opposes her very existence. The undergoing that is occurring and is simultaneously under examination here is, then, in an important sense *my* undergoing, even though from the outset the possibility of the “my”—of ownership, of property, of the proper, of the strictly identifiable—is in question. How I read Foucault—or, how reading of Foucault occurs with, for, or through me—cannot be definitive or normative for any other event or act of reading. But I'm convinced that it can be interesting, beneficial, and useful for many—both for philosophers and other intellectuals who study Foucault and for non-academic readers who care about the political struggles of queer people. For, after all, what the present book amounts to is a local political study, a study of the impact of Foucault's texts at a site of political oppression, at a site that serves as an anchor point for power and that constitutes itself as a locus of resistance and transformation.

In some senses—and I'll be the first to acknowledge it—this enterprise is a little bizarre, especially for someone steeped in and favorably disposed toward the analyses Foucault offers of society and many of the positions he takes regarding it. Foucault was well-known for his desire not to be known. He kept his private life out of his writing, claiming at one point that he wrote his books precisely “in order to have no face,” to be unidentifiable. He was suspicious of any discourse that smacked of confession, and he believed that whereas in the past biography might have been aggrandizing, nowadays it is belittling, because it turns its subject into nothing more than a collection of specific deviations from the norm or, to use his words, into “a case.” It is possible, therefore, that Foucault would have urged me not to publish this book. At the very least he would have pointed out that my extensive use of autobiographical material throughout is dangerous, that my writing runs some terrible risks as it parallels and mimics again and again the confessional, therapeutic, and liberal individualistic and humanistic discourses that it critiques. It risks being read as exactly the kind of discourse that it attempts to displace. It risks being taken as confession. And, since it is to a great extent my own personal experiences that serve as the text for this

undertaking, it risks turning my life, my *self*, into a “case.” Why do it then? Why run these risks?

I have two reasons. One has to do with what I will call for lack of a better word my “vocation.” As I understand and practice it, philosophy is not primarily a body of knowledge or a collection of skills; it is a way of living. Foucault called it an art of life, a practice of freedom. Because of that, it is impossible not to be passionately involved in the philosophical reading one does and in the philosophical writings one produces. To imagine otherwise is to delude oneself into a belief in something like pure Cartesian thought divorced from histories and bodies. I am implicated in what I write, so I may as well make myself part of the writing in a conscious and obvious way. That inclusion of myself in the text, however, need not function as an act of self-identification in contrast to Foucault’s attempt to “have no face.” On the contrary, my self-examination here is the reverse of self-identification. As Foucault’s analyses so often show, there are many ways in which our socially and historically produced identities endanger us, make us vulnerable, and close us off from possibilities. Identities often stand opposed to freedom. Insofar as they do, examination of them and of the processes that generate and maintain them is philosophically urgent. Because I am identified in particular ways and because I can’t simply “disidentify,” I must acknowledge my identities and work to understand them if I hope for a future that they do not dictate entirely, a future that remains open to the practice of philosophy. The other reason to run these risks has to do with the more mundane though much more frequently discussed question of whether Foucault’s work really does function as a help or a hindrance to political activity by and on behalf of non-heterosexual people, as so many theorists over the years have said or at least implied. Does his work really promote a kind of apathy or quietism, or does it stimulate, as he claimed, a pessimistic but potent and “hyper-” political activism (OGE, 232)? Instead of asking what kind of political stands Foucault takes and whether he is justified in taking them, I’m interested in asking what kind of political effects Foucault’s texts have. I believe that question can only be answered if we examine the practices of those who read the work carefully and take it seriously as nourishment for their political lives. I offer this book as just that sort of examination.

To the best of my knowledge, a study of this kind—one that takes an experience of reading Foucault’s works as its point of analysis—has not been done before. Instead, most of the commentary on and critique of Foucault’s work focuses on its logical argumentation, its reasoning and evidential warrant, rather than on its power/knowledge effects upon those who undergo the texts. Consequently, critics who assert that

Foucault's work has little or no positive value for political struggle necessarily base their negative assessments upon abstractions and theoretical projections, many of which may have nothing to do with the ways that the works operate in sites of concrete oppression and resistance. No genuine assessment of Foucault's work is possible, I would argue, until the kind of careful reading that I undertake here has been done, that is, until studies of his works' effects are not artificially and arbitrarily limited to the level of the purely theoretical. And perhaps, once that task is completed, the question of assessment will have settled itself . . . or quietly disappeared.