

Foucault, Sexuality, and Biopower

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Abstract

I seek in this essay to address two concerns. First, I wish to do a clarification about how we can properly problematize sexuality in the context of Foucault through *History of Sexuality, vol. I, An Introduction*, seeking to reestablish the importance of a philosopher who, sadly speaking, is often misconstrued to be using philosophy merely to justify the ambition of lesbian-gay-bi-transsexual movements for a much needed social recognition, to save them from an imagined sexual repression (such repression Foucault dismissed outright as a myth), or worse, to justify sexual promiscuity! My contention is that this is not the direction Foucault is taking us into. Second, I attempt to do an exposition of Foucault's biopower, or the power to foster the life of populations, as it was accounted for in the book aforementioned. I also seek to understand how biopower administers to the living especially in the area of sexuality. In other words, I will take a closer look at sexuality as a target of biopolitical productions.

Keywords: Foucault, sexuality, biopower, biopolitics, LGBT movement

Foucault Past the Rhetorics of “Sexual Liberation” and the Repressive Hypothesis

In his much celebrated work entitled *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault put together pieces of historical information leading him to conclude that what took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were actual events paving the way to a transition from one modality of power to another. The ambition for a more precise, calculative, efficient, and methodical penalty is what propelled the shift from the failing traditional “monarchical” justice system (because of its lapses) towards a more finely-tuned prison system. The prison is an institution that has a lot in common with schools and military barracks; it implements disciplinary devices and techniques on subjects. Penal disciplinarity may have achieved its full capacity with the creation of the panopticon, the grand prototypical

architecture that Foucault describes as that which assures an automatic function of power through constant surveillance.¹

Disciplinarity was not, as we have already stated, confined to the prison. It covers different areas of modern civilization, including the medical, psychiatric and scientific fields. And so sexuality and sexual impulses, of course, were areas that needed to be administered to. The need for policing the social body instigated different procedures and interventions on human pleasures. Society felt the need to insert these pleasures into a coherent body of scientific knowledge. This was achieved through the practice of confession, the task of telling of one's pleasures arising out of Christian pastoral practice, as well as normalizing and therapeutic interventions, inaugurating what Foucault can only refer to as the *scientia sexualis* of western civilization.² Through medicalization, a host of human practices having to do with one's sex were classified as if they were instances of "degeneracies" or "malaise." Of course we would like to arrest what were obviously violations of law—rape, adultery, even incest. But there were practices that for the longest time have been targeted by educational, medical, psychiatric and religious institutions, for reasons that may go beyond legal infringement: included in the list are infantile sexuality (often dismissed as if it was supposed to be nonexistent), onanism, the solitary habits of children in school dormitories and homes, homosexuality, nervousness in women (after the woman's body has been "hysterized" using Foucault's term), and other perversions that may have to do with marriage or family relations. Many of these practices were understood as if they were different forms of physical and mental disorders, contrary to what is supposed to be the natural course of human sexuality, damaging to the integrity of and putting to risk the fragile relations within a family or social group.

For a long time hermaphrodites were [deemed] criminals, or crime's offspring, since their anatomical disposition, their very being, confounded the law that distinguished the sexes and prescribed their union...Educators and doctors combated children's onanism like an epidemic that needed to be eradicated. What this actually entailed, throughout this whole secular campaign that mobilized the adult world around the sex of children, was using these tenuous pleasures as a prop constituting them as secrets (that is, forcing them into hiding so as to make possible their discovery), tracing

¹ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 73-103.

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol I, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 53-73.

them back to their source, tracking them from their origins to their effects, searching out everything that might cause them or simply enable them to exist...The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a ["past"], a case history and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology...We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized—Westphal's famous article of 1870 on "contrary sexual sensations" can stand as its date of birth—less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself...it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul.³

The so-called *repressive hypothesis* only maintains that sex in general has been repressed, that is, completely and unjustly silenced, and had it not been subjected to the aforementioned mechanisms that sought to examine, control, and discipline it, we would have been enjoying sex much better or that mankind would have achieved the humanists' ideal of "flourishing" sexuality. Such hypothesis has caused today's gender movements to take on the goal of liberating sexuality apparently for better life, to release hidden desires, to make them come out into the open. However, Foucault thought that the assumption that sex has been repressed, silenced, negated, blocked, and rendered mute is clearly mistaken. Quite the reverse is the case: the scientific and procedural systems that sought to arrest queer cases and sexual misconduct have become responsible for an even more massive proliferation of sexual discourse—the scandalizing and medicalizing of sex has created numerous avenues where sex can be talked about. Modern society has not, in fact, silenced sex. We have always been "open," and rather perversely. We have multiplied sexual discourses in ways never before imagined. Modern society is not merely a case of total sexual intolerance, a thought that overly simplifies the issue, but rather a case of seeking pleasures and impulses in their multiplicitous hiding places, to explicitate them, to replicate them, that is, to put them into discursive practice, to manage and administer them.

[Confession has done its part] that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully

³Ibid., 38, 42-3.

analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself...A censorship of sex? There was installed rather an apparatus for producing an even greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy.⁴

In other words, modern society was so keen at inventing and deploying devices for speaking about sex. Count as evidence the more intensive confessions, the inventions of cases of sexual pathologies, even the identification of sexual heterogeneities ranging from the anomalous child to the homosexual. Ours is a society that is utterly perverse because it intends to implant these perversions on human subjects.

One can ask, of course, why is society today so bent at analyzing, reforming, finding a cure for, disciplining, but producing great quantities of discourse for these sexual perversions? Foucault's answer is quite straightforward: we mean to police the state, to manage life, to control populations, to closely map the social body. Sex came to be understood as a very essential property of the state, for propagating the species, for the union of partners in the household, and as needing to be attended to by the institutions. Sex is at the very heart of what Foucault terms as biopower, which is our concern in the succeeding section.

The Power to Administer Life

The aforementioned shift from monarchical sovereignty to the prison system already manifests a movement from one form of politics of life to another—with the decline of monarchical justice systems the right to “take life or let live” was replaced by the power to “foster life or to disallow it to the point of death.”⁵ In the past, the king possessed the capacity to execute offenders or to terminate executions entirely; public executions were often accompanied by rituals displaying not only this capacity but also the thought that any offense committed was an offense against the king. This political framework seems to suggest that all energies were devoted to protecting the king, and so the people were at the king's disposal (he had indirect power to expose them to death) whenever some external force was threatening the kingdom. In other words, wars were fought in the name of the king. This manner of politics had already run its course and was superseded by a new modality of power that waged wars no longer in the service of the king but on entirely new grounds: the production, policing and regulation of life that was made manifest in systems of prodigious

⁴Ibid., 23.

⁵Ibid., 138.

manufacture, in the investment of bodies as producers, in the protection of accumulated and invested wealth and capital, or in the case of our recent history, in the stretching out of police apparatus in global campaigns against overpopulation or against enemies of some “global ethic” such as freedom, democracy, or “anti-terrorism” (despite the misleading polemics behind them).

And so this biopower was intended to “incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize and organize” rather than to simply impede human impulses, justified by the need to protect “the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, and develop its life.”⁶ And it is precisely within this political context, Foucault is quick to say, that we can properly problematize sex, that it truly becomes an issue. Sexuality is at the very heart of studies concerning the systematic optimization of the capabilities of body construed as a kind of productive machinery: a political economy of the body. Sex became an issue not only in biology, where the body is seen as the very basis of biological processes and reproduction, but also in demographics which entails a survey of the growth and decline of populations in relation to economics, a recording of mortality and birth rates. Biopower requires more than the arrest of petty misconduct at homes, in schools, even in workplaces; it also needs to deal with the population, and if it deems necessary, it must introduce economic policies that will monitor and correct growth. If it must, it will even induce infertility. It must take hold of bodies for productivity, but it must also hold the population accountable to itself. This it must do to maintain the life, the function, and the very existence of the productive machine. Most often, a governing body is tasked to finance and administer the populace by implementing insurance policies, supplying energy, water, health care, sanitation, education (although such a mechanism is not yet perfected in third world nations such as the Philippines where it appears that the same governing body, due to limited resources, reserves for itself the latent “right” to withdraw and deprive the population of these services as it sees fit, especially if the local government or whatever foreign influence or political force controlling it wishes merely to “contain” the population). Biopower, after all, maintains a corrective mechanism that will temporarily reduce or even disallow the lives of living species if such lives become counter-productive, which means that a part of the population may be deemed expendable. However, our analysis must not simplify biopower as negation, denial, or castration; on the contrary, biopower is self-propagating. As it polices, it aims to order, contain and restructure populations and create agents as producers (bodies are invested in the labor force), as docile but productive subjectivities—here an assemblage, a multiplicity of force relations emerge out of continuous

⁶Ibid., 136.

struggles and coordinations. Biopolitics is both manipulative and democratizing, although efforts were made to singularize them, multiplicities remain.

Despite the aforementioned developments, Foucault stressed that the goals of biopower were not designed in any way to engender humanitarianism. We know that it becomes an indispensable force for the advancement of capitalism which demanded that bodies are to be invested in machineries of production; this requires not only the docility of bodies but also the optimization, growth, and regulation of their life energies. We are all witnesses to the adverse effects of the avaricious capitalism of our age. While the right amount of production is necessary for economic sustenance, we cannot ignore the fact that the disciplinarity propelled by bourgeois impulses, often by the obsession to accumulate and police financial and material resources, also entails a number of human costs (many of these addressed already in Marxist philosophy). Apart from the phenomenon of alienation from the products of labor (in short, the lessening of buying power), the larger part of the expendable population is made to succumb to minimal wages, to imposed number of work hours that are often unjustified, to the demands of a fast-paced mode of existence where one is always in the hurry to meet deadlines. In other words, oftentimes discipline and prodigious production while demanding more work for less pay remained ridiculously indifferent to human limitations in general. But Foucault rejects the "humanitarian" embellishments of biopower for reasons well beyond the Marxist understanding of alienation and the loss of humanity. Modernity, we know, has introduced new horrors to human existence. True, wars are no longer premised on the expansion of territories of kings, but wars have never ceased; they have been as bloody as ever. This time, we engage in war not "in the name of the king," but rather in the name of human existence (of, say, the population of one part of the world at the expense of the population of another part) and the naked question of survival:

Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital...as the technology of wars has caused them to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiates them and the one that terminates them are in fact increasingly informed by the naked question of survival. The atomic situation is now at the end point of this process: the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to

guarantee an individual's [or a nation's] continued existence.⁷

We live in a time where war campaigns are launched in order to arrest nations or groups that are seen as economic threats to survival or even those that do not adhere to a "global" moral imperative. Those nations who have the means are more than willing to extend their police and surveillance apparatuses beyond their borders in order to secure themselves. To illuminate this point even further, we borrow the conception of the culture of "just war" or *bellum justum*, as it was exposed in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri entitled *Empire*. Accordingly, in the tradition of sovereign states, a state reserves the right to make war, a "just war," if confronted with a threat from the outside; this threat might take the form of an invasion that endangers territory and independence of the state. A profound transformation took place in recent history:

The traditional concept of just war involves the banalization of war and the celebration of it as an ethical instrument... These two traditional characteristics have reappeared in the postmodern world: on the one hand, war is reduced to the status of police action, and on the other, the new power that can legitimately exercise ethical functions through war is sacralized.⁸

In other words, war has ceased to be simply a defensive activity; nations tend increasingly to declare war because it is "justified" in itself, it is deemed necessary because of the apparent need to "give freedom to others" by way of "necessary" military and police intervention, because of some imagined absolute moral imperative—this necessitates the invention of the notion "Enemy" as an individual or multitude that opposes "war on terror," "democracy," "freedom," "population control," "foreign economic policy on imports," and so on and so forth. As insane as it might appear to be, war has become a grand campaign, launched not out of defensive necessity but rather to advance a kind of global "ethical order."⁹ Furthermore, it is in the nature of such campaigns that they should entice other nations to join the so-called just cause, through propaganda, lest they also be branded as threats, that is, as Enemies.

While it is true that wars have not ceased, we are constantly reminded that they are not driven by the politics of monarchical sovereignty

⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

where blood has symbolic function, or as in the case of Hardt and Negri, by the old model of imperialistic sovereign, an “empire” with an identified central military authority (monarch) such as old Rome stretching its territorial domain; not by that precisely but rather by a new modality of power, a new variety of “empire” that manifests in the form of biopolitical production, whose various centers and margins come into play—an organizing, policing and producing machine. As Foucault puts it,

[From a society] where power spoke *through* blood: the honor of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with his sword, executioners and tortures; [where] blood was *a reality with a symbolic function*...[we underwent a passage into a mode of political life where] the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used...*a symbolics of blood to an analytics of sexuality*.¹⁰

We cannot overemphasize that while biopower seeks to take hold of the *bios*, it rearranges the forces within itself in such a way that it gives way to plurality and multiplicity. Hardt and Negri’s account is useful here to emphasize the Foucaultian conception of multiplicity: “when it is attentive to the modalities of disciplinarity and/or control, [it] disrupts the linear and totalitarian figure of capitalist development...[marginal resistances become] individual points [that] are singularized in a thousand plateaus...a new milieu of maximum plurality and uncontainable singularization.”¹¹ Paradoxically, singularization does not dissolve multiplicity, this what is made to manifest in our manner of proceeding, where subjectivities themselves become, or at least are made to appear, “autonomous” producers who can play roles as agents in the proliferation of productive impulses. Or in other words, biopolitics has the capacity to create “situations in which, before coercively neutralizing difference, seem to absorb [difference] in an insignificant play of self-generating and self-regulating equilibria.”¹² The subjectivities themselves are turned into productive agents, and out of them emerge “needs, social relations, bodies, and minds...in the biopolitical sphere, life is made to work for production and production is made to work for life.”¹³ This modality of political life appears radically different from and incompatible with the old juridical model of sovereignty, dictatorship or totalitarianism.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 147.

¹¹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

Conclusion: On the Possibilities of Resistance

In their analysis of Foucault's notion of biopower, we also learn from Hardt and Negri that the end of the dialectic of modernity does not signal the end the dialectic of exploitation. It is in exposing the various forms of exploitation that biopower unmasks itself, exposing its abuses to humanity. Capitalism continues to exploit all the corners of the earth in order to realize its dream of surplus value. It establishes a special relation to countries that it exploits—it internalizes them as engines of production but keeps them *outside*: “gold and diamonds can be extracted from Peru and South Africa or sugarcane from Jamaica and Java perfectly well while those societies and that production continue to function through *noncapitalist* relations.”¹⁴ Economic growth and development of these “noncapitalist” societies, in order to serve capitalism, must be hampered and stalled, transforming them into machines designed merely for primitive accumulation. The noncapitalist environment is thus *capitalized* (internalized) in this manner. Even without internalization by homogenization, prodigious production is attained. No wonder the Philippines today cannot be allowed to function more than a mere “service” type of economy.

In the light of understanding this biopolitical production, resistance will not come in the form of a resurrection of the ploterian internationalism, or some sort of grand universal revolution by the masses, as envisioned by the surviving Marxist movements of our day. This is not to undermine our comrades' revolutionary spirit. Much more is accomplished rather by exposing the cracks in the machine. Resistance will come about as a result of knowing precisely what modes of production are we thrown into, what steps must be taken to resist them, in the face of the fact that biopower operates not by homogenization (as the Marxists have mistakenly supposed) but by recognizing differences, by giving an illusion of “autonomy” by way of making us producers of the kind of production that they want us to undertake. Biopower has become immune to ploterian internationalism. In order to defeat the machine, it is necessary to know the breakdown of its parts, to understand how it operates, to know how we are affected by its peripheries. We must understand its political economy.

At our disposal are numerous forms of resistances, ranging from critical interrogation to actual political practice. The Philippines, which remains an internalized “outside,” has remained one of the poorest countries in Asia, to say the least. But nothing stops us from engaging with biopower's peripherals, such as the International Monetary Fund, from exposing the manipulation of the interest rate system and their plans of perpetuating the debt servicing that keeps our people hungry and impoverished. Political will necessitating some amount of government intervention on businesses

¹⁴ Ibid., 225-226. Italicization for emphasis mine.

allows us to make the necessary improvements on our energy, industry, agriculture, and other means of sustenance without falling into mere profit-oriented avaricious production. A good amount of level-headed discourse is needed for intervention on economic policies, such as liberalization on importation and deregulatory politics. Nothing can stop us from critically interrogating whatever “vested interest” exists in capitalist-driven environmentalist NGO’s, who are being used at times to misinform and mislead populations into embracing an anti-technological, anti-life culture, for the benefit of a few. The machine, while it sweeps through the globe, also exposes a number of its own weaknesses: it is not a monolith without cracks. It is through these cracks that we begin to explore, navigate, and create avenues for resistance.

To properly close, let me bring to mind the insight of one of my mentors on Foucaultian philosophy, “We are not mere cogs in the machine, or rather, we are cogs that, properly speaking, are capable of spinning the machine into a grinding halt.”

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