

REVISTA ECO-PÓS

<http://www.pos.eco.ufrj.br/ojs-2.2.2/index.php/revista/index>



“Becoming Homosexual”: Michel Foucault on the Future of Gay Culture

David M. Halperin

Revista Eco-Pós, 2010, v. 13, n. 3, pp 136–154

A versão online deste artigo está disponível em:

<http://www.pos.eco.ufrj.br/ojs-2.2.2/index.php/revista/issue/view/25>

Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro

Informações adicionais da revista Eco-Pós

sobre: <http://www.pos.eco.ufrj.br/ojs-2.2.2/index.php/revista/about>

e-mail: ecopos.ufrj@gmail.com

Política de Acesso Livre

Esta revista oferece acesso livre imediato ao seu conteúdo, seguindo o princípio de que disponibilizar gratuitamente o conhecimento científico ao público proporciona maior democratização do conhecimento.

“Becoming Homosexual”: Michel Foucault on the Future of Gay Culture¹

David M. Halperin²
University of Michigan



RESUMO

O texto explora a idéia de resistência política como contra-produção em vez de liberação sexual a partir do pensamento de Michel Foucault sobre política gay. Defende-se que as reflexões de Foucault sobre o movimento gay e sobre o futuro da cultura gay merece maior visibilidade do que têm recebido até agora. Estas posições poderiam dar valiosas contribuições para o pensamento político gay e pode fornecer modelos para formas eficazes de resistência cultural frente a ação do poder disciplinar em geral.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Michel Foucault • Homossexualismo • Resistência Cultural •
Teoria *Queer*

Michel Foucault's writings about sex and power have come to represent such potent sources of political inspiration to gay activists today that it's easy to forget how deeply they shocked and scandalized non-gay-identified left-wing intellectuals at the time of their publication in the 1970s. But it's not hard to

-
- 1 The essay published here is excerpted from a longer study of “The Queer Politics of Michel Foucault” included in my forthcoming book, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). I wrote the original version of this essay for presentation at a conference on “Michel Foucault and Gay Cultural Politics,” jointly sponsored by The Australian Centre for Lesbian and Gay Research at The University of Sydney and by The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney; the conference took place at The Museum of Contemporary Art on November 5, 1994. I wish to thank Robert Aldrich, Nicholas Baume, and Garry Wotherspoon for organising the conference as well as Gary Dowsett for commenting on my paper. I have presented other versions of the essay at The University of Newcastle, The University of Tasmania, La Trobe University, The University of Melbourne, and Monash University. I wish to thank Harold Tarrant, Ruth Blair, Dennis Altman, Annamarie Jagose, and Terry Threadgold for making those visits possible; I also wish to thank the audiences at those events for lively discussions of the issues.
 - 2 Professor de História e Teoria da Sexualidade na Universidade de Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA. Publicou, entre outros, *Gay Shame* (Un. of Chicago Press, 2009), *What Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk and Subjectivity* (Un. of Michigan Press, 2007) e *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Un. of Chicago Press, 2002).

figure out what it was about Foucault's thinking that só appalled traditional leftists. Foucault's outlook on sexual politics is radically anti-emancipatory.

As Leo Bersani succinctly summarizes it, the original thesis of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976) is "that power in our societies functions primarily not by repressing spontaneous sexual drives but by producing multiple sexualities, and that through the classification, distribution, and moral rating of those sexualities the individuals practicing them can be approved, treated, marginalized, sequestered, disciplined, or normalized. The most effective resistance to this disciplinary productivity should, Foucault suggests, take the form not of a struggle against prohibition, but rather of a kind of counter-productivity. It is not a question of lifting the barriers to seething repressed drives, but of consciously, deliberately playing on the surfaces of our bodies with forms or intensities of pleasure not covered, so to speak, by the disciplinary classifications that have until now taught us what sex is."(Bersani, 1995: 81).

It is this idea of political resistance by means of sexual counter-productivity instead of by means of sexual liberation that I intend to explore here. Not surprisingly, perhaps, Foucault elaborated on this notion most fully and concretely in his reflections on the specific problems and challenges faced by the lesbian and gay movement as it was taking shape in his day. It is therefore to Foucault's thinking about gay politics that I shall turn. Rather than advance a thesis or a theory of my own, I propose simply to expound Foucault's position on gay politics as I've been able to reconstitute it from a scattering of his published writings and interviews, especially his interviews with the gay press. Some of the relevant texts are now quite inaccessible, and the particular political stands that Foucault takes in them may not be widely known. It is my belief that Foucault's thinking about the gay movement and about the future of gay culture deserves greater exposure than it has hitherto received; if better known, it might prove to be a valuable resource for gay political thought today and might offer models for efficacious forms of cultural resistance to the workings of disciplinary power in general. It is on such provisional assumptions, at least, that I have premised the present study.



“Homosexuality is a historic opportunity to open up new relational and affective potentialities,” Michel Foucault declared to a gay interviewer in 1981, “not in virtue of qualities intrinsic to the homosexual, but because the position of the homosexual ‘off-center,’ somehow, together with the diagonal lines which the homosexual can draw through the social fabric, makes it possible to bring to light these potentialities” (1981: 38-39). Foucault saw homosexuality not as a newlyliberated species of sexual being but as a strategically-situated marginal position from which it might be possible to glimpse and to devise new ways of relating to oneself and to others. “To be gay,” he explained,

is to be in a state of becoming . . . the point is not to be homosexual but to keep working persistently at being gay. . . . to place oneself in a dimension where the sexual choices one makes are present and have their effects on the ensemble of our life. . . . [T]hese sexual choices ought to be at the same time creators of ways of life. To be gay signifies that these choices diffuse themselves across the entire life; it is also a certain manner of refusing the modes of life offered; it is to make a sexual choice into the impetus for a change of existence (Joecker; Sanzio,1982:24).

Homosexuality is not a psychological condition that we discover but a way of being that we practice in order to redefine the meaning of who we are and what we do—and in order to make ourselves and our world more gay. Foucault proposes to us that instead of treating homosexuality as an occasion to articulate the secret truth of our own desires, we might ask ourselves, “what sorts of relations can be established, invented, multiplied, modulated *through* [our] homosexuality. . . . The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one’s sex but rather to use, from now on, one’s sexuality to achieve a multiplicity of types of relations” (De L’Amitié comme mode de vie: 38).

Foucault insisted that homosexuality did not name an already existing form of desire but was rather “*something to be desired*”: our task is “to *become* homosexual, not to persist in acknowledging that we *are*” (Ibid; Joecker et al. : 24). (The idea of “becoming” homosexual may seem nonsensical, at first glance, but if one thinks of homosexuality not as a determinate form of psychosexual life or a species of erotic being, that is as a sexual *positivity*—such that either one is or one isn’t—but rather as a marginal location and a form of resistance to sexual regulation, that is as a *queer* or non-normative sexual *positionality*, then Foucault’s emphasis on *becoming* homosexual makes considerably better sense.

Indeed, in the stress he lays on becoming instead of being, Foucault would seem to have anticipated the recent displacement of *gay* politics by the anti-essentialist, anti-assimilationist, anti-identitarian brand of contemporary sexual identity politics that goes by the name of *queer*.) Accordingly, Foucault argued that it would be a mistake to concentrate too much political energy on the struggle to obtain specific juridical “rights” for lesbians and gay men.

I think we should consider the battle for gay rights as an episode that cannot be the final stage. For two reasons: first because a right, in its real effects, is much more linked to attitudes and patterns of behavior than to legal formulations. There can be discrimination against homosexuals even if such discriminations are prohibited by law. It is therefore necessary to establish homosexual lifestyles, existential choices in which sexual relations with people of the same sex will be important. It's not enough as part of a more general way of life, or in addition to it, to be permitted to make love with someone of the same sex. The fact of making love with someone of the same sex can very naturally involve a whole series of choices, a whole series of other values and choices for which there are not yet real possibilities. It's not only a matter of integrating this strange little practice of making love with someone of the same sex into pre-existing cultures; it's a matter of constructing cultural forms (Barbedette, 1982:36).

And Foucault went on to add, “if what we want to do is create a new way of life, then the question of individual rights is not pertinent” (Ibid: 38) The point is not to disparage the struggle for gay rights, which Foucault himself supported (“It is important . . . to have the possibility—and the right—to choose your own sexuality,” he said; “human rights regarding sexuality are important. . . .”) (Gallager; Wilson, 1984: 27)³, but to look beyond that struggle to something else, to the possibility of inventing new rights and establishing new kinds of relationships that might entail their own privileges, duties, and rights.



That “becoming homosexual” constitutes not just a resistance to social norms or a negation of established values but a positive and creative construction of different ways of life seemed self-evident to Foucault. “As far back as I can remember,” he told an interviewer for the French gay magazine *Gai pied*, “to desire boys meant to desire relationships with boys. That has

3 According to David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), 562, the interview originally took place two years earlier, in June 1982.

always been, for me, something important. Not necessarily in the form of the couple, but as a question of existence: how is it possible for men to be together? to live together, to share their time, their meals, their room, their leisure, their sorrows, their knowledge, their confidences?

What exactly is this thing—to be among men, ‘stripped down,’ outside institutionalized relationships, family, profession, obligatory forms of association?” The problem of inventing queer relationships can be further complicated by additional factors, such as differences between the partners in age or race or class or nationality: there exist no readily available social formulas for mediating and negotiating those differences. “Two men of notably different ages—what rule will they be able to use in order to communicate?” Foucault asked; “they are face to face with one another, without armor, without conventional phrases, without anything to stabilize the meaning of the movement which takes them one toward the other. They have to invent from A to Z a relationship without form. . . .”(De L’Amitié comme mode de vie: 38) Self-invention is not a luxury or a pastime for lesbians and gay men: it is a necessity. And it is therefore part of the acquired practice of what Foucault called “becoming homosexual.” (As Michael Warner has recently put it, “Queers do a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer” [Warner, 1993: xiii⁴]).

What might some of the new relationships of which Foucault spoke look like? Foucault gave a few hints about what he had in mind in some of his interviews with the gay press. The first challenge Foucault saw was “to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasures” and, accordingly, to devise relationships that might offer opportunities for enhancing pleasure and make it possible for us to escape the ready-made formulas already available to us which offer no alternative to purely sexual encounters, on the one hand, and the merging of identities in romantic love, on the other (“De L’Amitié comme mode de vie: 39). Foucault protested against the paucity of choices.

We live in a relational world that institutions have considerably impoverished. Society and the institutions which frame it have limited the possibility of relationships because a rich relational world would be very complex to

4 Citing Garfinkel, 1984, essay first published in 1967.

manage. . . . In effect, we live in a legal, social, and institutional world where the only relations possible are extremely few, extremely simplified, and extremely poor.

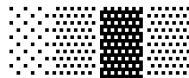
There is, of course, the fundamental relation of marriage, and the relations of family, but how many other relations should exist. . . !

Hence Foucault's interest in classical antiquity and its social methods for institutionalizing friendships between men, which in their time gave rise to "a system of supple and relatively codified relations" with its own panoply of "obligations, tasks, reciprocal duties, [and] hierarchy" (Barbedette, 1982: 38). Foucault made it clear that he did not recommend reviving that classical form of social relations; he invoked it merely in order to dramatize the possibility of multiplying the forms of personal association beyond the small number that presently exist.

If intimate human bonds had not been limited exclusively to marriage and kinship in the past, then they need not be so limited in the future—even if they were to take radically *different* forms from the social relations in the past to which Foucault appealed as evidence for the theoretical and practical possibility of pluralizing contemporary institutions of social and sexual life.

One possibility that intrigued Foucault, and that he put forward as an example of how we might multiply the currently-available kinds of legally institutionalized personal relationships, while nonetheless accommodating to some degree the established institutions of law and modern society, was the possibility of expanding the practice of legal adoption. "We should secure recognition for relations of provisional coexistence," he urged, including "adoption . . . of one adult by another. Why shouldn't I adopt a friend who's ten years younger than I am? And even if he's ten years older? Rather than arguing that rights are fundamental and natural to the individual, we should try to imagine and create a new relational right which permits all possible types of relations to exist and not be prevented, blocked, or annulled by impoverished relational institutions"(Ibid). Adoption might also provide a mechanism for formalizing differences of wealth or age or education between lovers, acknowledging informal inequality while providing a framework of mutual support in which such inequality, accompanied by clearly marked rights and

duties, might not devolve into exploitation or domination.



Of course, the classic case of the strategic use of power differentials to produce effects of pleasure instead of effects of domination is sadomasochistic eroticism. And so it may not be wholly unexpected that some of Foucault's clearest indications of the sorts of practices that might comprise "becoming homosexual" occur in the context of his discussions of S/M. It is also in those discussions that Foucault's belief in the transformative potential of what may now properly be called queer sex (as we shall see) emerges most eloquently, if still somewhat sketchily.

First of all, Foucault emphasizes that relations which go by the name of "domination" in S/M represent a strategy for creating pleasure, not a form of personal or political subjugation.

What strikes me with regard to S/M is how it differs from social power. What characterizes power is the fact that it is a strategic relation that has been stabilized through institutions. So the mobility in power relations is limited, and there are strongholds that are very, very difficult to suppress because they have been institutionalized and are now very pervasive in courts, codes and so on. All that means that the strategic relations of people are made rigid.

On this point, the S/M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles, but everyone knows very well that those roles can be reversed. . . . Or, even when the roles are stabilized, you know very well that it is always a game. Either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tacit, that makes [the participants] aware of certain boundaries. This strategic game as a source of bodily pleasure is very interesting. But I wouldn't say that it is a reproduction, inside the erotic relationship, of the structure of power. It is an acting out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure.

The practice of S/M is the creation of pleasure, and there is an identity with [*i.e.*, a personal identity attached to] that creation. And that's why S/M is really a subculture. It's a process of invention. S/M is *the use* of a strategic relationship as a source of pleasure (physical pleasure). What is interesting, is that in . . . heterosexual life those strategic relations come before sex [*e.g.*, rituals of male pursuit and female flight in the conventional heterosexual dating game]. It's a strategic relation in order to obtain sex. And in S/M those strategic relations are inside sex, as a convention of pleasure within a particular situation (Gallager; Wilson:29-30, emphasis in original).

So S/M is a game in which power differentials are subordinated to the

overall strategic purpose of producing human pleasure; it is not a form of domination in which human beings are subordinated to the functioning of rigidly structured power differentials.

Next, Foucault saw S/M, especially as it was cultivated and elaborated in gay male urban enclaves in the United States as part of a wider practice of subcultural community formation, not as the expression of a deep psychological impulse which a permissive society had finally enabled people to indulge but rather as something new and creative that modern subjects could *do* with the sexuality to which their identities had become so closely attached. S/M represented to Foucault “a process of invention,” insofar as it detaches sexual pleasure from sexuality (in an S/M scene, the precise gender and sexual orientation of one’s sexual partner may lose some of their importance as prerequisites of sexual excitement) and insofar as it frees bodily pleasure from organ-specificity, from exclusive localization in the genitals. S/M thereby makes possible a new relation between the body and pleasure, and one effect of continued S/M practice is to alter one’s relation to one’s own body.

I don’t think that this movement of sexual practices has anything to do with the disclosure or the uncovering of S/M tendencies deep within our unconscious, and so on. I think that S/M is much more than that; it’s the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously. The idea that S/M is related to a deep violence, that S/M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid. We know very well what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticization of the body. I think it’s a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization [*i.e.*, the “degenitalization”] of pleasure. The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure, and the idea that sexual pleasure is the root of *all* our possible pleasure—I think *that’s* something quite wrong. These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on (Gallager; Wilson:27-28, emphasis in original).

The notion of “desexualization” is a key one for Foucault, and it has been much misunderstood. When he speaks of “desexualization,” Foucault is drawing on the meaning of the French word, *sexe*, in the sense of sexual organ. What he means by S/M’s “desexualization of pleasure” is not that S/M detaches pleasure from all acts of a conceivably sexual nature (even if it does destroy the absolute dependence of sexual pleasure on sexual intercourse narrowly defined) but that S/M detaches sexual pleasure from genital specificity, from localization in or

dependence on the genitals. S/M, along with various related (though often quite distinct) practices of bondage, shaving, tit torture, cock and ball torture, piercing, humiliation, flagellation, and fist-fucking, produces intense sexual pleasure while bypassing, to a greater or lesser extent, the genitals themselves; it involves the eroticization of non-genital regions of the body, such as the nipples, the anus, the skin, and the entire surface of the body. And it finds other erotic uses for the genitals than that of stimulation to the point of orgasm. S/M therefore represents a remapping of the male body's erotic sites, a redistribution of its so-called erogenous zones, a break-up of the erotic monopoly traditionally held by the genitals, and even a re-eroticization of the (male) genitals as sites of vulnerability instead of instruments of mastery and vehicles of self-assertion. In all of those respects, S/M is a potentially self-transformative practice.



By invoking his term “desexualization,” Foucault seems to be referring back to a 1978 interview with Jean Le Bitoux which did not appear in French until ten years later (in what seems to have been an imperfect transcript), has never been published in English, and is not included in the recent four-volume compilation of Foucault's *Dits et écrits 1954-1988*. A prominent theme in that interview is Foucault's insistence on a distinction between gay and straight machismo, between even the hypermasculine “clone” style of gay male comportment as it was elaborated in New York and San Francisco in the late 1970s and the larger “phallocratic culture” (Foucault's term) in which we live. Foucault welcomes the possibility of a strategic alliance between gay men and feminism, “which has enabled homosexuals to demonstrate that their taste for men is not another form of phallocracy.” Clone culture is not an expression of male supremicism or separatism, according to Foucault: “one has to look closer in order to grasp that this entire theatrical display of masculinity does not at all coincide with a revalorization of the male *as male*”.

On the contrary: in daily life, the relations between these men are filled with tenderness, with communitarian practices of life and of sexuality. Beneath the

sign and under the shelter of these masculine theatrical displays [*i.e.*, leather jackets, motorcycle insignia, caps with visors, boots, etc.], the sexual relations that take place reveal themselves to be, rather, valorizations of a masochist sort. Physical practices of the fist-fucking sort are practices that one can call devirilized, that is desexed [*i.e.*, degenitalized]. They are in effect extraordinary counterfeit pleasures that one achieves by means of various devices, signs, symbols, or drugs such as poppers or MDA.

What these signs and symbols of masculinity are for is not to go back to something that would be on the order of phallocratism, of machismo, but rather to invent oneself, to make one's body into the site of production of extraordinarily polymorphous pleasures, pleasures that at the same time are detached from the valorization of the genitals and especially of the male genitals. After all, the point is to detach oneself from this virile form of obligatory pleasure—namely orgasm, orgasm in the ejaculatory sense, in the masculine sense of the term (Foucault, 1988:34).

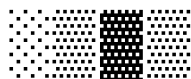
The hypermasculine look of gay clones is deceiving. What the new styles of gay virility represent, paradoxically, is a strategy for valorizing various practices of devirilization under the sign of masculinity, thereby forging a new association between masculinity and sexual receptivity or penetrability, while detaching male homosexuality from its phobic association with “femininity” (conceived in phallocratic terms as “passivity” or as an absence of phallic aggressivity). By desexing (that is, degenitalizing) bodily pleasure, gay male S/M practices make possible the creation of a masculine sexual identity that need no longer be centered in the phallus (or that finds uses for the phallus which mortify rather than celebrate it), a sexual identity defined by submission, surrender, penetrability—by the refusal, in short, of domination.

Masculinity can now be reconstituted in a devirilized form: that is, it can be constituted not phallocentrically but performatively. (If there is an argument to be made about the possible political congeniality of gay male hypermasculinity and feminism, it will have to be made on the basis of some such analysis of gender performativity)⁵ Foucault similarly interprets lesbian S/M as the expression of a parallel struggle on the part of women to escape from constraining stereotypes of femininity (Gallagher; Wilson, 1984:29).

The creative and transformative potential of gay sex is especially clear in

5 I emphasize this in order to contrast Foucault's position with that taken by Richard D. Mohr, *Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies* (Boston: Beacon press, 1992), 135-203, who makes a much less plausible argument about the supposedly close relations among democracy, egalitarianism, feminism, and gay male active/passive role-swapping, in which Mohr discovers an implicit validation of all the liberal political virtues (equality, fraternity, justice, reciprocity, etc.). Mohr's account is nonetheless worth consulting in full.

the case of fistfucking, the practice that Foucault singles out for mention and that he seems to have in mind when he speaks of “produc[ing] pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies.” Fist-fucking, after all, is a sexual practice that nonetheless differs in several important respects from “sexual intercourse” as the latter is conventionally defined. It is less an end-driven, teleological action aimed at achieving release of sexual tension through orgasm than a gradual, lengthy process—“an art,” as Gayle Rubin describes (Rubin, 1991: 126).⁶ Intensity and duration of feeling, not climax, are the key values: the process can sometimes go on for hours, and it is possible that neither partner may come—or (in the case of men) even maintain an erection for long. It is also possible for the receptive male partner to come without an erection. Hence, fist-fucking has been spoken of by its practitioners not as sex but as a kind of “anal yoga.” As such, it would seem to represent a practical refutation of what Foucault considered, as we have seen, the mistaken “idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure, and the idea that sexual pleasure is the root of *all* our possible pleasure.” The emergence of fist-fucking as both a sexual and subcultural phenomenon therefore has the potential to contribute to redefining both the meaning and the practice of sex, along the lines sketched out by Foucault when in 1977, in an interview entitled, “Down with the Dictatorship of Sex!,” he announced, “I am for the decentralization, the regionalization of all pleasures” (Chapsal, 1977: 56-57).



Foucault’s is not the last word on the subject of S/M, of course. His pronouncements represent only one man’s reflections, and those reflections are not necessarily the most accurate, the most honest, or the most illuminating⁷.²¹ But on at least one point Foucault was demonstrably right: his claim that what

6 For the sake of clarity, I’ll quote Rubin’s definition of fist-fucking (which, she notes, “is also known as fisting or handballing” [the rugby metaphors are presumably coincidental]): “It is a sexual technique in which the hand and arm, rather than a penis or dildo, are used to penetrate a bodily orifice. Fisting usually refers to anal penetration, although the terms are also used for the insertion of a hand into a vagina” (p. 121n.).

7 For a powerful (but, I believe, ultimately unconvincing) challenge to Foucault’s understanding and evaluation of S/M, see Bersani, *Homos*, 77-112.

gay men of his era were up to was “the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously” is amply borne out by the example of fist-fucking. For whatever else one might say about fist-fucking, there is no doubt about the fact that it *is*, historically speaking, a new pleasure. Rubin dates the emergence of fistfucking as an elaborated collective practice and community formation to the late 1960s; by the 1970s it had furnished the basis for an entire subculture complete with its own clubs and organizations, its own urban spaces, its own artwork and insignia, and even its own public, communal events (Rubin, 1994).

To have invented a genuinely new form of pleasure represented, in Foucault’s eyes, a major accomplishment—and no wonder: after all, as Foucault liked to complain to his friends, the nineteenth century had invented myriad species of perverse sexual *desire*, but virtually nothing new in the way of sexual *pleasure* had been created for millennia. “The possibility of using our bodies as a possible source of very numerous pleasures is something that is very pleasure is therefore a significant achievement in its own right and it testifies powerfully and thrillingly to the creative potential of a gay praxis.

The distinction between desire and pleasure implicit in Foucault’s comments on S/M was one he returned to and made explicit in several key passages, both in his books and in his interviews. The distinction may help to explain the specifically political significance Foucault attached to the invention of the new pleasures produced by fist-fucking or recreational drugs as well as to the invention of new sexual environments, such as saunas, bathhouses, and sex clubs, in which novel varieties of sexual pleasure could be experienced. “It is very interesting to note”, Foucault observed, “that for centuries people generally, as well as doctors, psychiatrists and even liberation movements, have always spoken about desire, and never about pleasure. ‘We have to liberate our desire,’ they say. No! We have to create new pleasure. And then maybe desire will follow” (Gallagher; Wilson,1984:28). Foucault explained his emphasis on pleasure and his de-emphasis on desire in his interview with Jean Le Bitoux.

I am advancing this term [pleasure], because it seems to me that it escapes the medical and naturalistic connotations inherent in the notion of desire. That notion has been used as a tool, as a grid of intelligibility, a calibration in terms of

normality: “Tell me what your desire is and I will tell you who you are, whether you are normal or not, and then I can validate or invalidate your desire.”

One keeps running into this tactic which goes from the notion of Christian concupiscence all the way through the Freudian notion of desire, passing through the notion of the sexual instinct in the 1840s. Desire is not an event but a permanent feature of the subject: it provides a basis onto which all that psychologico-medical armature can attach itself. The term “pleasure” on the other hand is virgin territory, unused, almost devoid of meaning. There is no “pathology” of pleasure, no “abnormal” pleasure. It is an event “outside the subject,” or at the limit of the subject, taking place in that something which is neither of the body nor of the soul, which is neither inside nor outside—in short, a notion neither assigned nor assignable (Foucault in Macey: 365).

It was in order to intensify experiences of pleasure “at the limit of the subject” that Foucault advocated the use of what he called “*good drugs*” (Gallagher; Wilson, 1984: 28, emphasis in original). He found similar possibilities in bathhouse sex:

I think it is politically important that sexuality be able to function the way it functions in the saunas, where, without [having to submit to] the condition of being imprisoned in one’s own identity, in one’s own past, in one’s own face, one can meet people who are to you what one is to them: nothing else but bodies with which combinations, fabrications of pleasure will be possible. These places afford an exceptional possibility of desubjectivization, of desubjection, perhaps not the most radical but in any case sufficiently intense to be worth taking note of. [Anonymity is important] because of the intensity of the pleasure that follows from it. It’s not the affirmation of identity that’s important, it’s the affirmation of non-identity. . . . It’s an important experience in which one invents, for as long as one wants, pleasures which one fabricates together [with others].⁸

For Foucault, as for Plato (though for almost exactly opposite reasons), sex would seem to qualify as a low-level form of philosophical activity (Halperin, 1985). At least, intense sexual pleasure performs the function of decentering the subject and thereby goes a certain way toward providing Foucault with what he had previously sought in the writings of Nietzsche and Bataille: namely, answers to such questions as “Can’t there be experiences in which the subject, in its constitutive relations, in its self-identity, isn’t given any more? And thus wouldn’t experiences be given in which the subject could dissociate itself, break its relationship with itself, lose its identity?” (Foucault, 1991: 49).

It is not desire but pleasure that, for Foucault, holds out the promise of such a disaggregating experience. Unlike desire, which expresses the subject’s

8 Foucault, “Le Gai savoir” (I), 36. My translation of this passage follows the corrected French text supplied by Didier Eribon (1994:286) based on the transcript of the original interview in the Centre Michel Foucault at the Bibliothèque du Saulchoir in Paris.

individuality, history, and identity as a subject, pleasure is desubjectivating, impersonal: it shatters identity, subjectivity, and dissolves the subject, however fleetingly, into the sensorial continuum of the body, into the unconscious dreaming of the mind. As Foucault observed in 1979 in the course of an address to Arcadie, the old French homophile organization, on the subject of the transgendered memoirist Herculine Barbin and the nineteenth-century insistence on determining the “true sex” of hermaphrodites, “Pleasure is something which passes from one individual to another; it is not secreted by identity. Pleasure has no passport, no identification papers.”(quoted in Macey: 364).



If we are to prevent personal identity from becoming “the law, the principle, the rule” of individual existence (Gallagher; Wilson, 1984: 28), then it is ultimately sexuality itself that will have to be resisted, for it is sexuality that amalgamates desire and identity into a unitary and stable feature of the individual person and thereby imparts to the subject a “true self”—a “self” that constitutes the “truth” of the person and functions as an object both of social regulation and of personal administration.

Modern techniques of disciplinary power make use of sexuality in order to attach to us a stable identity, which is to a significant degree a sexual identity; by attaching that identity to us, they attach us to themselves. “Just because this notion of sexuality has enabled us to fight [on behalf of our own homosexuality] doesn’t mean that it doesn’t carry with it a certain number of dangers,” Foucault remarked to Jean Le Bitoux. “There is an entire biologism of sexuality and therefore an entire hold over it by doctors and psychologists—in short, by the agencies of normalization. We have over us doctors, pedagogues, law-makers, adults, parents who talk to us of sexuality! . . . It is not enough to liberate sexuality; we also have to liberate ourselves . . . from the very notion of sexuality”(Foucault, *Le Gay Savoir*: 31) And in an interview given a few years earlier, Foucault made a number of positive recommendations: “We have to

invent with our bodies—with their elements, their surfaces, their masses, their thicknesses, a non-disciplinary eroticism, an eroticism of the body in a volatile and diffuse state, with its chance encounters and its uncalculated pleasures. . . .”(Foucault, 1976: 3-5). Foucault’s famous and rather cryptic remarks, at the end of *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, about the political importance of attacking sexuality itself and promoting pleasures at the expense of sex make a great deal more sense when they are set in the context of his insistent distinction between desire, sexuality, and identity, on the one hand, and bodies and pleasures, on the other. “We must not believe that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power,” Foucault wrote; “on the contrary, one thereby follows in the track of the entire apparatus of sexuality. It is from the agency of sex that one has to free oneself if one wishes, through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality, to assert, against the hold of power, the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the apparatus of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.”(Foucault, 1976: 207-8⁹)

The transformative power of the sexual practices that gay men have invented reveals in this context something of its political efficacy: through the invention of novel, intense, and scattered bodily pleasures, gay culture brings about a tactical reversal of the mechanisms of sexuality, making strategic use of power differentials and sexual identity-categories in order to create a gay praxis that ultimately dispenses with “sexuality” and destabilizes the very constitution of identity itself. Fist-fucking and sadomasochism appear in this light as utopian political practices, insofar as they disrupt normative sexual identities and thereby generate—of their own accord, and despite being indulged in *not* for the sake of politics but purely for the sake of pleasure—a means of resistance to the discipline of sexuality. The shattering force of intense bodily pleasure, detached from its exclusive localization in the genitals and regionalized throughout various zones of the body, decenters the subject and disarticulates the psychic integrity of the self to which a sexual identity has become attached. By

9 my translation of this passage follows (but does not exactly reproduce) the standard English version: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 157.

shattering the subject of sexuality, queer sex opens up the possibility for the cultivation of a more impersonal self, a self that can function as the substance of ongoing ethical elaboration—and thus as the site of future transformation.



At the same time as he proposed practicing what Leo Bersani calls “*jouissance* as a mode of ascesis” (Bersani, 1987:222). Foucault also argued implicitly against the tendency to associate resistance only with radically non-normative social and sexual practices. Despite his interest in the transformative potential of S/M, Foucault was far from insisting that gay life or gay sex had to be thoroughly transgressive, experimental, or avant-gardist in order to qualify as a form of political resistance. Given the way that society is currently organized, after all, even the most ordinary and innocuous-seeming expressions of gay sexuality threaten the coherence of the social order. To reduce the inventiveness and creativity of gay life to sexual promiscuity, for example, is to erase, in Foucault’s view, “everything that can possibly be upsetting about affection, tenderness, friendship, faithfulness, comradeship, companionship, for which a fairly controlled society cannot make room without fearing that alliances might be formed, that unexpected lines of force might appear.” And he added,

Imagining a sexual act that does not conform to the law or to nature, that’s not what upsets people. But that individuals might begin to love each other, that’s the problem. That goes against the grain of social institutions: they are already crisscrossed by emotional intensities which both hold them in place and fill them with turmoil—look at the army where love between men is endlessly solicited and shamed. The institutional regulations cannot approve such [emotional] relations [between men], with their multiple intensities, variable colorations, imperceptible movements, and changing forms—relations that produce a shortcircuit and introduce love where there ought to be law, regularity, and custom (De L’Amitié Comme mode de vie: 38)¹⁰.

Hence it is “the homosexual way of life” that, according to Foucault, is much more threatening “than the sexual act itself” (De L’Amitié Comme mode de vie: 38). (Which may be why it has been easier to legalize gay sex than gay marriage.)

¹⁰ Foucault expands on this theme in Gallagher and Wilson, “Michel Foucault,” 30.

And Foucault added that what straight society finds intolerable about gay people is not our specific pleasures or sexual practices but their outcome, their effect on the quality of our lives: straight people can forgive us our physical thrills but what they ultimately cannot forgive us is our happiness (Foucault, 1994: 35).

Similarly, the most interesting thing about S/M and fist-fucking, to Foucault, may not have been their allegedly disaggregating impact on the individual subject of desire but their incongruous integration into “homosexual ways of life.” As Rubin has recently documented, the 1970s was a time of vigorous and expansive community formation for gay leathermen in San Francisco and elsewhere in the United States (Rubin, 1994). What that meant is that fist-fucking and S/M did not remain merely occasional or isolated practices but became linked to other expressions of subcultural development, including dress, patterns of life and work, the transformation of neighborhoods, the growth of community organizations, the provision of public services, the staging of athletic events, and ultimately the emergence of locally-based and -funded social and political groups. These developments represented signal instances of the new sorts of things that gay men could *do* with their sexuality, and in fact what may have intrigued Foucault most about fist-fucking was the way a specific non-normative sexual practice could come to provide the origin and basis for such seemingly remote and unrelated events as bake sales, community fundraisers, and block parties. Those “communitarian practices of life and sexuality” which Foucault saw knitting together the social relationships of gay leathermen demonstrated dramatically how one could “use . . . one’s sexuality to achieve a multiplicity of types of relations,” “to define and develop a way of life,” to “construct cultural forms.”



Ultimately, in Foucault’s opinion, “the gay movement has a future which goes beyond gays themselves. . . . [It may include the possibility of a] culture in the large sense, a culture which invents ways of relating, types of existence,

types of values, types of exchanges between individuals that are really new and are neither the same as, nor superimposed on, existing cultural forms. If that's possible, then gay culture will be not only a choice of homosexuals for homosexuals. It would create relations that are, at certain points, transferable to heterosexuals." (Elsewhere Foucault cited bathhouses as an example of a gay cultural form that heterosexuals might benefit from (Foucault, 1994: 35); similarly, the institutional codification of "relations of provisional coexistence" might enable "types of exchanges between individuals" that would be beneficial to heterosexuals as well as to lesbians and gay men.) "We have to reverse things a bit. Rather than saying what we said at one time: 'Let's try to re-introduce homosexuality into the general norm of social relations,' let's say the reverse: 'No! Let's escape as much as possible from the type of relations which society proposes for us and try to create in the empty space where we are new relational possibilities.' By proposing a new relational *right*, we will see that nonhomosexual people can enrich their lives by changing their own schema of relations"(Barbedette, 1982: 38-39). And, in another context, Foucault remarked, in a formulation that exactly captures the excitement, the difficulty, and the risk of queer politics, "For me, what must be produced is not man identical to himself, exactly as nature would have designed him or according to his essence; on the contrary, we must produce something that doesn't yet exist and about which we cannot know how and what it will be" (Foucault, 1991:121). That ability to cultivate in ourselves the ability to surpass ourselves, to enter into our own futurity—that sometimes dizzingly scary, and obviously risky, but also exhilarating personal and collective experiment, performed on ourselves by ourselves—is what ultimately defined for Foucault, as it still defines for many lesbian and gay cultural activists today, the transformative practice of queer politics.

References

- Barbedette, Gilles. "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will: A Conversation with Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp = *October* 43 (Winter 1987), 197-222.

- _____. *Homos*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Chapsal, Madeleine. "Michel Foucault: A bas la dictature du sexe," *L'Express* (January 24, 1977), 56-57.
- Foucault, Michel. "Le Gai savoir" (I), *Mec Magazine* 5 (June 1988), 32-36.
- _____. "De L'Amitié comme mode de vie," *Le Gai Pied* 25 (April 1981), 38-39.
- _____. *La Volonté de savoir*, Histoire de la sexualité, 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.
- _____. "Sade, sergent du sexe," *Cinématographe* 16 (December 1975-January 1976), 3-5.
- _____. *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).
- _____. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
- _____. *Masques* 13 (Spring 1982), 14-24.
- _____. "Le Gai savoir" (II), *Mec Magazine* 6-7 (July-August 1988), 30-33.
- Gallagher, Bob; Wilson, Alexander. "Michel Foucault. An Interview: Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," *The Advocate* 400 (August 7, 1984), 26-30.
- Garfinkel, Harold. "Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an Intersexed Person," *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984.
- Halperin, David M. "Platonic *Erôs* and What Men Call Love," *Ancient Philosophy* 5 (1985), 161-204.
- Joecker, J. P.; Ouerd, M.; Sanzio, A. "Histoire et homosexualité: Entretien avec Macey, David. *The Lives of Michel Foucault*. London: Hutchinson, 1993.
- Michel Foucault" *Christopher Street* 6.4 (May 1982), 36-41.
- Mohr, Richard D. *Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies*. Boston: Beacon press, 1992.
- Rubin, Gayle S. "The Valley of the Kings: Leathermen in San Francisco, 1960-1990," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1994).
- _____. "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole," in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, ed. Mark Thompson. Boston: Alyson, 1991.
- Warner, Michael. "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Warner. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.