The concept of “homosexuality” designates for Foucault a problem that stems out of the larger issue concerning the emergence of sexuality during the nineteenth century (FDE2a, 1112). It is crucial to note that this does not simply reiterate Foucault’s claim, namely that “homosexuality is a notion that dates from the nineteenth century, and thus, [...] it is a recent category” (Foucault, 2005, 46 & 2011, 387). More significantly, it points out that a specific sexual practice that was not an important problem during the XVIII century (FDE2a, 1351), and even during ancient times (FDE2a, 1105-6; Veyne, 1985, 29), it became one only when the definition of one’s individuality was invested by one’s sexual behavior. And so, individuals who previously had sexual relations with another person of the same sex experienced them as libertinage or as an active or passive role within a relationship (FDE2a, 1136). Their sexual experience was definitely not a homosexual experience or a region of sexual experience (Foucault, 2005, 46 & 2011, 386; EAK, 190) isolated from all other sexual practices and forms of pleasure (i.e. incest FDE2a, 1154 or sodomy FDE2a, 1112; see also, EHS1, 39).

According to Foucault, homosexuality is not a trans-historical notion (“une catégorie sexuelle ou anthropologique constante” FDE2a, 1111; Halperin, 1990, 45). It is not a notion equally applicable to all cultures and periods as “an obligatory grid of intelligibility for certain concrete [sexual] practices” (ECF-BBIO, 3). Nor is it a name that refers to a natural kind (EHS1, 105; Halperin, 1995, 45). It is rather a term that has a certain historical emergence, and, in order to understand this notion, it is
important to grasp its conditions of possibility. Since Foucault’s history of sexuality is written from the standpoint of a history of discourses, he did not take a position on whether the predisposition for homosexuality is innate or socially conditioned. “I have strictly nothing to say on this matter. No comment.” (FDE2a, 1140) So, how did homosexual behavior become invested into individual identity to such an extent that it marked the inner essence of the person?

Foucault points out two significant modifications caused by the discursive explosion of the nineteenth century. First, this quantitative phenomenon, this proliferation of discourses speaking about sex, produced “a centrifugal movement with respect to heterosexual monogamy.” (EHS1, 38) The sexuality of the legitimate couple not only began to function as a norm, it also cast light onto the “peripheral sexuality” of children, mad men and women, criminals, and “the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex.” (EHS1, 38) Even though this series of discourses about homosexuality “made possible a strong advance of social control into these areas of ‘perversity’”, such a form of sexuality continued nonetheless to be tolerated, and this is how “homosexuality began to speak on its behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturality” be acknowledged.” (EHS1, 101) Yet, as Foucault points out, as long as this act of fighting against being imprisoned within this notion of homosexuality was only a pure reactivity, or a “reverse discourse,” this strategy failed “to shift homosexuality from the position of an object of power/knowledge to a position of legitimate subjective agency” (Halperin, 1995, 57).

For Foucault, a world of perversion (the numberless family of perverts, EHS1, 40) emerges in the nineteenth century. “An entire sub-race race was born, different
[...] from the libertines of the past” (EHS1, 40), which could not be explained in repressive terms since “the severity of the codes relating to sexual offenses diminished considerably in the nineteenth century and that law itself often deferred to medicine” (EHS1, 40-1). The novelty consists in the emergence of perversion as a medical object (FDE2a, 322). We see here the creation of an entire system of knowledge that does not simply classify those “incomplete” sexual practices (i.e homosexuality) within an organic, functional, mental pathological framework, but it does so in order to manage them. This new form of power, which was supposed to control and survey perversions instead of enforcing a repressive system based on prohibition, brings “an additional ruse of severity” (EHS1, 41) by incorporating those perversions and producing a new specification of individuals (EHS1, 42-3). This is how “the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage” (EHS1, 43). The homosexual was more than a type of life or anatomical/physiological shape, he was a medical object to be explained either by appealing to his past or his childhood.

“Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality” (EHS1, 43), and so he became a “case study” (FSP, 225-227). This is the moment when the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality is constituted, and as soon as it is constituted, it becomes a form of sexuality different than sodomy (a legal category defined by a type of sexual relation). Homosexuality is understood as a “quality of sexual sensibility,” a “contrary sexual sensation”, a “kind of interior androgyny”, “a hermaphroism of the soul”. Hence, “the homosexual was now a species” (EHS1, 43).
This new modality of power coupled with a medical and psychiatric system of knowledge did more than render visible these so called “aberrant sexualities”. It implanted in the perverts’ bodies a permanent reality as a new raison d’être. Arnold Davidson calls this particular system of knowledge about disease “the psychiatric style of reasoning”. Unlike the “anatomical style of reasoning” which focuses on the internal and external anatomical structure of one’s sexual organs, the “psychiatric style of reasoning” focuses on “impulses, tastes, aptitudes, satisfactions, and psychic traits” (Davidson, 2001, 35). Without this central distinction, says Davidson, we could not understand why “the hermaphrodite and the homosexual are as different as the genitalia and the psyche.” (Davidson, 2001, 37)

Moreover, “there is no such thing as sexuality outside of the psychiatric style of reasoning.” (Davidson, 2001, 37-8) The entire sexual domain was placed under the rule of the normal and the pathological, and so, there had to be something, “in the depths of the organism” (EHS1, 44), like a dysfunction or a symptom, of the sexual instinct. Once the sexual instinct is couched in functional terms, perversions, including homosexuality, “become a natural class of diseases.” (Davidson, 2001, 14)

Starting with the nineteenth century, homosexuality becomes not merely a sexual perversion, but a specific psychiatric object, a dysfunction of the sexual instinct that requires, like all other psychic diseases (i.e. madness), therapy, intervention, and ultimately, control. “The homosexual is a medical patient of psychiatry” (Davidson, 2001, 22). This is the subtle way in which the medical and psychiatric system of knowledge incorporates sexual “instinctual disturbances” not merely to label them, or to classify them, but in order to set up a “network of pleasures and powers” that
defines true ways of being oneself, a truthful sexuality, and thus, it defines our most inner truth (FDE2a, 937).

Certainly, people like Gide, Oscar Wilde, Hirschfeld, etc., fought against the “historico-political takeover” (Foucault, 2005, 47 & 2011, 387) of this notion of homosexuality that was imposing more than a form of experience or pleasure, but a certain identity, a certain relation to oneself. Hence, in earlier struggles, it was important to fight for certain rights for sexuality, rights for pleasure (Foucault, 2005, 47 & 2011, 387). However, for Foucault, the battle for the gay rights, as important as it is, should be only an “episode” and not “the final stage” of this struggle (FDE2a, 1127). The reason is that it is very “hard to carry on the struggle using the terms of sexuality [or homosexuality] without [...] getting trapped by notions such as sexual disease, sexual pathology, normal sexuality” (Foucault, 2005, 49 & 2011, 388).

Homosexuality should not be a notion for an already existing desire, but “something to be desired” (FDE2a, 982), a way of life to be invented, “a becoming gay” (FDE2a, 1555), which “makes ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasures” (FDE2a, 984). This is why for Foucault homosexuality has little to do with sexual liberation. Resistance is not a negation but a creative process (FDE2a, 1560), and so, to be gay is to define and develop a certain way of life (FDE2a, 984). How does one define a homosexual way of life?

Foucault does not propose a generalizable definition for a homosexual way of life since such a discourse could be easily idealized, and imposed back as a norm on other homosexuals. In this sense, he understands his role more as a facilitator than as a leader of the gay movement (FDE2a, 1153). For him, while it is important to be
creative and experiment with new relations and forms of pleasure, it is equally important to be aware of the dangers built into this notion. So, homosexuality is a strategic position (a historic opportunity, FDE2a, 985) from where one has to constantly create new ways to relate to oneself and to others (an aesthetics of existence, EHS2, 10-11).

In the reevaluation of the notion of homosexuality (“rejuvenation of the instruments, objectives, and axes of struggle”, Foucault, 2005, 50 & 2011, 389), Foucault puts forward “the theme of pleasure.” In order to escape the medico-psychological presuppositions embedded in the notion of desire, Foucault proposes the word pleasure, “which in the end means nothing, which is still [...] rather empty of content and unsullied by possible uses” (Foucault, 2005, 51 & 2011, 389). He contends, “there is no ‘abnormal’ pleasure; there is no ‘pathology’ of pleasure”, and thus, a mode of life where the self transforms itself into a source of pleasure would avoid “the medical armature that was built into the traditional notion of desire” (Foucault, 2005, 51 & 2011, 390). As long as the apparatus of sexuality cannot normalize pleasures, it would not be able to re/define the inner essence of the subject, and so, the previous dictum “tell me what your desire is, and I’ll tell you what you are as a subject” (Foucault, 2005, 51 & 2011, 390) would not function anymore.

And since for Foucault “pleasure has no passport, no identification papers” (Foucault in Halperin, 1995, 95), a way of life that would focus on the intensification, modulation, and multiplication of sexual pleasures would not only function as a way of “decentering the subject and fragmenting personal identity” (Halperin, 1995, 94; FDE2a, 940), but it would desexualize the body (FDE2a, 1557; FDE2a, 321) and also
free those pleasures from organ specificity (degenitalization of pleasure). It is a way
to invent oneself, to transform one’s body into “a place for the production of
extraordinary polymorphous pleasures, detached from the valorization of sex”
(Foucault, 2005, 62 & 2011, 397). As an effect of such a strategy for creating
pleasures, new forms of relationships, new forms of gay sexual practices are
produced (i.e. fist-fucking; FDE2a, 1556). And Foucault can only feel sorry for “those
unhappy heterosexuals” (Foucault, 2005, 68 & 2011, 400) who do not have places (e.g.
baths, love-hotels, FDE2a, 779), where they can cease to be a subject and experience
all sorts of possible encounters and pleasures. But how can one define through
certain sexual practices a relational system, a homosexual style of life?

This is possible if homosexuality is understood as an ascetic mode of life, as a
kind of spiritual exercise, as a practice of self-mastery in relation to oneself and to
others. This “homosexual askésis” (Davidson, 1994, 126-135 & Halperin, 1995, 101-
120) instead of being synonym for less pleasure, calls for more intensified, multiplied,
novel forms of pleasure. And all those pleasures are not attainable unless there is
mutual friendship, love, trust, fidelity, and companionship among the gay individuals
(FDE2a, 983).

In some ways, Foucault’s work does not provide an ‘improved’ definition of
homosexuality “but, on the contrary, [an] attempt to empty homosexuality of its
positive content, of its material and psychic determinations, in order to make it
available to us as a site for the continuing construction and renewal of continually
changing identities” (Halperin, 1995, 122). A homosexual mode of life is ultimately
“an art of living”, a care for the self and for the others, where sexual choices have an effect on one’s entire life (FDE2a, 1144; FDE2a, 1114).

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Bibliography


Suggested Readings:


