

NOTE ON SEXUALITY IN THE WORK OF MICHEL FOUCAULT*

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I would like to tell you, by way of introduction, about a debate I once had with some judges, about an experience which is of course a major one in our culture: that of crime. I recall that we were perpetually confronted with the hard and sombre heart of the criminal act, and that many saw, in the perplexity that took hold of us on each occasion, the sign of a radical lack of understanding which finally sent us back to the mystery of Evil itself. At that point I tried to defend the thesis which maintains that the difficulty, the complication of the criminal act, comes less from a fundamental obscurity which is thought to be essential to crime, from a hidden and as it were impenetrable identity, than from the historic entanglements, the complex sedimentation of discourses about crime, which meant that when we spoke about it we always stumbled, less because of an essential difficulty, than because of, I believe, a historical confusion of discourses.

It is this consideration that I would like to put as an exergue, or at least as a preface to our discussions: the idea that the opacity of the sexual also comes perhaps less from a difficulty belonging to the very nature of sexuality, than from the confused intermingling of discourses which, for thousands of years, have been woven around the sexual act. It is the idea that the foundation of the hesitancy that comes over us when we try to speak, this confession of ignorance about what is at the basis of the sexual, derives more from a re-sifting of discourses, from a tight knit accumulation

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of words, than from an essential astonishment. This opacity in short, also comes from the historic saturation of discourses.

This then by way of introduction. Now I will try, since it is because I am supposed to be a specialist that I can legitimate my speaking to you today and taking up your time, I will attempt then to lay hold of some threads in Foucault's thinking about sexuality. I will begin then by setting out, as a basis for discussion, three dimensions of this thinking: sexuality and the distribution of prohibitions (*partage des interdits*); sexuality and resistance; sexuality and subjectivation. And on each occasion a qualified opacity should emerge.

Sexuality as division (*partage*)

My starting point is one of Foucault's very first texts, since it is the first preface to *Madness and Civilisation* (we should say more exactly, since this is the original title as published by Plon: *Madness and Unreason*). It dates from 1961 and was replaced, in 1972, by a short note, when the work was re-edited by Gallimard. In this preface then Foucault writes:

One could write a history of limits – of those obscure gestures, necessarily forgotten once they are accomplished, through which a culture rejects something that for it is the Exterior; and right throughout its history, this void that has been created, this blank space through which it isolates itself, describes it just as much as its values do. Because it receives and maintains its values in the continuity of history; but in this region that we are trying to describe, it exercises its essential choices, it creates the division which gives it its positive face; there we find the original density by which it is formed [...]. Other divisions should also be described: in the luminous unity of appearance, the absolute division of the dream which man cannot prevent himself from questioning about his own truth [...]. The history should also be written,

and not simply in ethnological terms, of sexual prohibitions: by describing in our own culture the continually moving and obstinate forms of repression, and not in order to construct the chronicle of morality and tolerance, but to bring to light, as a limit of the western world and the origin of its morality, the tragic division from the happy world of desire. Finally, in the first place, we should speak about the experience of madness.

We can see clearly how what seems to interest Foucault here (in a perspective, on this occasion, completely opposed to what he will try to defend subsequently) is precisely the notion of sexual prohibition. Nevertheless, we should note right away that prohibition does not interest him in the sense that it is caught up in a repressive dimension (denouncing or forbidding). Prohibition only preoccupies him in fact when it is taken in a dimension that I believe we must resign ourselves to calling 'historical-metaphysical'. What is meant then by this rather conventional coupling of 'historical-metaphysical'? It means that Foucault reflects on sexual prohibition in its essential aspect of division. For Foucault there exist in every culture sufficiently decisive divisions that, as such, carve out its identity. I mean divisions in which a culture risks itself absolutely (we know that for Foucault obviously the division between reason and madness constitutes the major break in Western identity). Now I call these divisions 'historical-metaphysical'. Historical first of all in that they find in history the surface on which they occur. But metaphysical in that it is impossible, it seems, to go back beyond them, because they constitute the very opening up of meaning. So then we see clearly that what grabs Foucault (first off, at the very threshold of his work) in sexuality (in the manner again of the madness-reason coupling or the opposition between dreaming and waking), is that it is, in history, what makes history possible.

Sexuality as resistance

Nevertheless it should be noted that sexuality (with of course all the metaphysical guarantees you want) here remains a prisoner of a thematic of repression and prohibition. Now, Foucault will present himself in the seventies (unleashing at this point incomprehension and misunderstanding) precisely as refusing *à priori* any history of sexuality as a history of prohibitions (his critique of the 'repressive hypothesis'). These matters are well known and we can pass quickly over them.¹ I would prefer to insist here on the way in which Foucault conceives of the modern invention of sexuality, starting from the medicalisation of hysteria in the nineteenth century, as he describes it in his final course at the *Collège de France* in 1974.

For Foucault, neurology introduces into medicine a new body, no longer constituted (like that of pathological anatomy) of resonating volumes, of lesions that are visible in the light of death, but a body that is, as it were, an ensemble of functional responses for organised stimuli: a reflex-body. In order to make this new body emerge, it is no longer a question (as in the anatomical-pathological construct) of making the sick person lie down passively and palpating his hills and hollows. Rather is he given instructions (walk, lift your right arm, raise the left leg, etc.). And the body then, in the loquacious silence of its postures, speaks to the attentive gaze of the clinician. Soon, from 1885 on, Charcot will address this neurological body (new and receptive to orders) by means of

¹ Provided we remember (about this question of prohibitions) that Foucault oscillates between three conceptual decisions: in the seventies (in *The will to know*) Foucault criticises the notion of prohibition (and the corollary one of the Law) inasmuch as prohibition only comes into play as an instrument to intensify power, but never as a final structure, essential to the latter; in the eighties, Foucault hesitates between two positions: either proclaiming the trans-historical dimension of prohibition, while immediately exposing its monotony (in this case it is by means of a stylisation of prohibitions through forms of existence that the historicity of the experience is laid down); or again making of prohibition a Christian invention (in other words a historically dated way of structuring ethical experience).

hypnosis, which in an imperative if not absolute manner will fall under the sway of the doctor's will: the cover for a new body and a new power, that is going to determine the birth of sexuality.

Foucault reconstructs the history of the hysterics at the Salpêtrière, as a farcical drama of medical power in three acts. *Act one*: Charcot requires the hysteric to produce pre-established symptoms (this is the work of Richet on 'hysterical epilepsy'). What she has to do is to 'reproduce, at the demand of medical power-knowledge, a symptomatology in conformity with epilepsy'. The hysterics soon become party to the game, reproducing *grandes crises* with an upsetting theatricality and ostentation. *Act two*: the neurologist, overwhelmed by his success, tries to discover on the vast plateau of the Salpêtrière a natural referent as an external guarantee. The fact is that Charcot very quickly hypnotises his patients and is able to trigger whatever symptoms he wants during these sessions. Does this not bring to light the artifice of the hysterical symptom? Does it not become obvious that hysteria, far from following the course of a natural illness, entirely obeys the suggestion of the doctor?

The railways came to Charcot help. Their development provided an opportunity for a multiplication and especially a diversification of traumas. Certain workers found themselves incapable of taking up their work again after the emotional shock of accidents which had not left any detectable lesion. The insurance companies were sceptical. Charcot, for his part, quickly understood the theatrical advantage to be drawn from them. He organised a confrontation between the shell-shocked railway worker and the hypnotised hysteric: and he found that they presented identical paralyses. The injured worker, a stranger to the medical culture of the Salpêtrière, authenticates then the hysteric who presents a comparable post-hypnotic syndrome (the will of the doctor intervening, in the case of the hypnotised hysteric, as experimental trauma). On the other hand, once it had been decreed that she suffered from a natural illness, the hysteric acted as a criterion to separate out the good hysterical workers from malingering employees. After twenty-five centuries of

disparagement the hysteric sees herself put forward as the mistress of the truth. *Final act*: the parallels constructed between hysterics and those injured on the railway allows there to be supposed at the origin of every hysteria not experimentally provoked an initial motivating trauma of a psychical nature. It is the emotional shock of the accident that paralyses the worker, by inflicting on him a state of psychological distress and morbid suggestibility, in which for example the terror of being crushed becomes the certainty of having been so. And this, since it happens in a state of dissociated consciousness, finds an immediate and automatic corporal extension (paralysis), rather than presenting itself as a theme of waking consciousness. A trauma of the same kind ought to be found at the origin of all hysterical symptoms, and it is no longer surprising to find that hypnosis can cancel out or trigger symptoms at will, because precisely only a hypnoid state of consciousness allows the psychical trauma to extend into the corporal symptom.

Starting from this theoretical construction Charcot goes on to question the hypnotised hysterics about their earliest childhood, about events which might have disturbed them. And here, if we follow Foucault, there arises the ultimate counter-manoeuvre of hysterics with respect to the doctor: into the openness of this speech that is permitted, they are going to precipitate their sexual life and their pleasure. This time Charcot refuses to listen to them. The tactic of power, which was aimed at imposing on compliant hysterics a neurological body, is finally overwhelmed; the hysterics now use the breach to substitute for it a sexual body. This new body of hysteria, Charcot can no longer accept (his final defeat). His neurological reference points cannot deal with it. Foucault can then conclude that the birth of psychoanalysis was an attempt to medicalise this new body erected before a resentful Charcot: a way to make him shut up and listen to her speaking. We can understand then in this ideal and magnificent narrative, that sexuality (as a historical invention) owes it opacity to a refusal to allow itself to be medicalised, or rather a successful counter-offensive. It is an opacity that resists.

Sexuality and subjectification

The final point that I would like to tackle is itself the most opaque one: it is that of the destiny of sexuality in Foucault's final books. I will no doubt be reproached here for sinning through an excess of the spirit of paradox: because is it not from this epoch that there comes precisely in Foucault a head-on thematising of sexuality (with the appearance of *The Uses of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*)? But it must be clearly seen here that, fundamentally, sexuality only attracted Foucault in so far as it allowed him to elaborate the study of the processes of subjectification. Namely, that sexual opacity was once more displaced: after sexuality as tragic division (rejected into the night of an immemorial impossibility of what precedes it and makes it possible), after sexuality as the modern invention of hysterics (to undo the power of the doctor), a final sexual opacity emerges: that of the processes of subjectification.

It is here once again that Foucault encounters psychoanalysis (no doubt in its most blinkered version). Because the way in which Foucault is going to consider sexuality here (basing himself on the texts of classical Greece and of the Hellenistic and Roman period) is as a dimension of experience in the ethical structuring of a subject. But the ethical subject in question is here prior to the *homo psychologicus* (whether in its Christian version of the subject of exegesis having to carry out an examination of the origin of his representations, in order to detect in it the trace of suspect desires; or again in its modern version as object of the human sciences).

This means that sexuality never intervenes (in all the arts of existence, or again in the techniques of the self) as a surface of objectivity on which one can gather further knowledge about the subject. Sexuality is opaque but only in the negative sense that it is never a question of opposing to it the transparency of a knowing. What Foucault firmly reproaches psychoanalysis with (in these final texts where there is so little question of approaching it head-on, but in which it remains the explicit horizon), is continuing to situate itself as a business of knowing, a knowing that puts forward the sexual as its privileged theme. But sexuality is not

necessarily a scientific key giving access to the subject. Or rather it is effectively this, but only since a precarious and recent historical synthesis. Sexuality in the texts of classical Greece is not something that must be known in order to understand oneself better, but designates rather a series of acts inasmuch as it makes up an aesthetic form of existence, in so far as they inform a given life-style. Sexuality in the Hellenistic period is not this object that must be understood under pain of misunderstanding oneself, but it refers to a form of behaviour that must be organised in terms of regulating the care of the self.

For Foucault I believe that this above all means - taking the risk of classifying things into very broad periods - that we must oppose two great periods of western culture: the one described as Antiquity (which would embrace the period of classical Greece of the fifth and fourth centuries and the Hellenistic and Roman period up to the second century of our era); and the one that would go from the first texts of institutional Christianity up to the modern foundation of the human sciences. In the first, the subject is captured within an ethical structure that includes a certain number of practices of the self, with techniques of examination and self-knowledge only representing a part of these. In the second, the subject is primarily defined for himself as surface of examination (and complication of discursive desires) as something that he has to get to know, through techniques of exegesis first of all, before the subject becomes a mute scientific object, a neutral wall of the knowledge of the human sciences. And it is from this knowledge alone (the vague project of human sciences) that people will try to deduce a morality as a logical consequence.

There is then something like an inversion of the relationships between the epistemological principle and the ascetic principle, and sexuality can operate as a touchstone to judge the structure of this relationship in the modern knowledge of the subject. For psychoanalysis, does sexuality primarily designate a point to which there can be attached a general style of existence, or a necessary if not primordial theme in the enterprise of self-knowledge? No doubt it is for it to answer, but it would

be necessary to re-read one day, the passage from Freud to Lacan by taking up again the framework for reading that is left to us by the final Foucault.

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