

# Contemporary Implications of Michel Foucault

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This kind invitation by Cindy Zeiher and Mike Grimshaw to contribute to this issue on Foucault offers me the great advantage of exploring new challenges from my perspective. Such challenges encompass several facets. Today, without a doubt, the most prohibitive challenge comes from what we call 'postmodernism' now understood as ignorant politics in the sense that it is merely 'a politics of theory'. Here I am careful not to become distracted especially since my work is situated in, as Jacques Lacan calls it, the Freudian field:

L'unilatéralité de notre position est semblable à celle du chimiste qui ramène toutes les combinaisons à la force de l'attraction chimique. Il ne nie pas pour autant la force de la pesanteur, il laisse au physicien le soin de l'étudier.<sup>1</sup>

We can think of such an orienting similar to blinkers (also known as blinders) put on a horse so that it does not lose sight of its way. Here such an operative blindness is also reinforced by my reluctance to any explicit use of the prefix, 'post' (with the exception of 'post-scriptum'). This is especially because I do not see the precise meaning of modernism; the term itself is composed within the suffix 'ism' which French novelist, Nathalie Sarraute argues as harbouring an untimely character.<sup>2</sup> Such a position is also ratified by those, such as Michel Foucault, Claude Lévi-

Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and so on, who together comprise the so-called 'structuralism' movement despite never having explicitly taken up this designation. Moreover, it is also well-known that this use of 'ism' can be a precise tool for the devaluation of a field of work or a discipline. Before modern times, the Latins knew neither 'Platonism' nor 'Aristotelianism' as in their language, two adjectival forms existed: *platonicus* and *aristotelicus*. The insertion of the suffix 'ism' transforms a work and an author into an abstract essence. Modernist thinker Robert Castel imagined striking a such a blow at psychoanalysis, entitling his 1976 work, *Le Psychoanalysme*. Here we can say that the effect of such an inscription ensures that modernism remains a vague notion – as it was similarly in the United States where the uptake of so-called French theory emanated in so expansive a fashion it inevitably misses the mark. Thus, what emerged was a merging of theoretical works which neglected to explore what makes them distinctive from each other.

Another challenging facet to consider is the status given to thought. Michel Foucault: is he really the name of a thought? Or rather, a thought which should be re-thought? Such a position would be to overlook the fact that, despite him being so personally amenable, he did lead several battles, an act which he did not try to hide or obfuscate: "I only say these things insofar as I consider that it allows them to be transformed."<sup>3</sup>

For Foucault, speaking about battles in the way that he did was already a transformational process. For example, the GIP (Intervention Group on Prisons/Prison Information Group) was distinctly a collective and not an individual uprising. What was so remarkable was the intention of the GIP not to speak only to the experiences of those who were imprisoned, but also to discreetly direct them to take their destiny into their own hands – which this collective in part succeeded in doing. This Foucauldian move, being close to the psychoanalyst and especially to the analysand, prompted me to have recourse to Foucault,<sup>4</sup> among other thinkers, in order to influence psychoanalysis so that it does not lose its way (as it presently does in various manners).

Let's put the Lacanians aside for a moment and turn instead to the gay and lesbian movement because it will be within this field that we find the implementation of a fairer connection to Michel Foucault, and one of the persistent effects of his contemporary implications. In his *Saint Foucault – Towards has Gay Hagiography*<sup>5</sup>, David Halperin introduced Foucault as "a fucking saint" who saw in homosexuality a strategic opportunity for self-transformation.

## Emergence of a New Field: Gay and Lesbian Studies

The aftermath of Foucault's battles continues today. His great book on the history of madness in the classical age still upsets some French psychiatrists who do not miss an opportunity to denounce his thesis even more than sixty years after its publication in 1961. They were touched to the quick and remain so, demonstrated by their incessant, ferocious cries. Moreover, Foucault's challenge to what was called 'sexuality' (both at the time and recently) gave rise to important colloquia and publications.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Foucault remains troubling to this day is topical. But in remaining topical, he inevitably arouses responses and various uses of his work. He certainly aroused many authors who have relied on his work and thus configured gay, lesbian, and queer fields. Here too, scholarship serves to strengthen political commitments, which in turn can sharpen scholarship itself. It is the effects of the erotic which upsets what one believes to know – here we realize that solid well-established notions that were once believed never wavered as long as they were intrinsic to a narrative which quietly served certain interests.

What might be some examples here? It was thought that heterosexuality was a notion encompassing all time and emanating from all places; in a word: universal. We learn that universalism was not, as previously thought, a characteristic of an immutable human nature, but that it had been promoted during Occident times (1892) and had followed a market ideological logic of homosexuality, which was also new at that time (1880). What led to questioning the hetero/gay binary was the discovery that 'heterosexual' did not qualify as 'normal' (as is still thought today) but a perversion (a term that was attached to the 'homosexual' as a kind of unquestioned evidence). The bisexual was first a pervert in the sense that s/he showed not only an erotic attraction for women, but also for men.

'Homosexual' was also deposed. It was believed that homosexuality was already practiced in ancient Greece, and this prestigious reference served homosexuals themselves who found in this logic granted them some legitimacy. Well perhaps not entirely, the ancient Greek men were not 'homosexual' in the modern sense but erotically loved young boys until hair starts to grow on their chin. The Greek masters were paedophiles, or better: pederasts.<sup>7</sup> Also, pedagogues, because they did not dissociate – as is required of teachers today – between the erotic and the formation of the future citizen. In the North American universities, such dissociation between eroticism and pedagogy now pushes far from such moralizing ambitions. In other words, the will to control one's behaviour has eclipsed the desire to consider ethical reflections. Recently, a teacher-friend of mine in Chicago was admonished by the management of his university: one of his students having declared that they were upset, if not traumatized, by his course of study. He was

informed that the student stated it was in his own best interest not to study a particular passage from the *Traumdeutung* where Freud writes that the child wants to sleep with his mother and kill his father. The poor kid was much troubled. The issue had become one whereby the student believed that because he had paid dearly for his university year, this granted to him a right of censorship on what his professor taught. There is a name for this, these warnings issued to teachers in order to bring them to heel: 'Trigger Warning' – proof of this phenomenon is quite widespread.

Like a house of cards that collapses as soon as one card is removed, there are many other taken-for-granted notions that wavered due to the scholarship of gay lesbian, trans and queer. Consider so-called 'sado-masochism' (S/M), already underscored by Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan. We had once thought we had done something with this double term by bringing together two 'perversions'; it was thought as if conjoining S/M would allow it to better stand out as a perversion. However, this was to neglect what Foucault had already indicated, namely that S/M could be a strategic way to report a source of pleasure.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it was a misunderstanding at the time to consider that S/M could be something else other than a drive configuration (here is the 'psy function' denounced in France by Foucault and many others, starting with Georges Canguilhem) in any given individual which only served him to be ostracized on the grounds that he would be 'perverse'. But what exactly is this 'something else' which lies beyond the drive configuration? Here we can think of an exercise that is both erotic and collective – a perfect example is the one described by Gayle Rubin in his justly famous article titled "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole."<sup>9</sup>

We may have already glimpsed that the very notion of perversion has lost a kind of evidence in which it was held and that thus, for lack of one of its terms, was dismembered in the categories of neurosis/psychosis/perversion. We think perversion emerged from the 'clinical' observations and reflections of sexologists and other psychiatrists – in a word, of serious people without any doubt; their diplomas, their social position is all testified. However, knowing when precisely this notion was produced (during the 19th century) has thrown some confusion into this assumption of evidence, of what constitutes perversion. We have since discovered that 'perversion' was not so much the result of 'scientific' studies as the product of collusion; a complicity between psychiatrists and novelists, each going to find in the other enough erotic fuel to feed one's writings. One can appreciate the kind of change that is implied by observing that these writings which are quite simply, pornographic, served some support for masturbatory activities, while at the same

time, it is not known whether the clinical narratives of Sigmund Freud provided similar creative nourishment.

Another erotic card was also devalued: Transsexualism was once seen by psychiatrists as an illness, sometimes even declared as a psychosis. Much like gay men demanding to take charge of their AIDS treatment, transsexuals have also become largely removed from medical control concerning their own health. That is until obtaining in 1993 a declaration from American psychiatrists that transsexuality would no longer be considered a mental disorder. The slogan of the trans people of the time was a bit optimistic: "Gender Euphoria, not Gender Dysphoria".

However, it could be that what fuelled such rightly denounced positions in gay and lesbian studies also made more explicit its Foucauldian inspiration via a study dedicated to the invention of sodomy.<sup>10</sup> Sodomy was first a notion of Christian moral doctrine, the only sin of flesh to be against the Spirit and therefore, unredeemable. The term itself was promoted in the wake of the martyrdom of Saint Pelage,<sup>11</sup> a young child captive who was tortured then beheaded for having refused the erotic solicitations of Abd al-Rahmân III (Caliph of Cordoba in the then occupied Spain). Pelage was ten years old and very beautiful (a sign considered by the Christians as the visible demonstration of his divine anointment) and wished to join Jesus. Summoned by the Muslim king who offers and promises him so much more by inviting him to instead follow Muhammad; Saint Pelage refused, strikes the king until he bleeds, spits in his face and shouts at him: "Do you take me for one of your effeminates?" The age of ten appears to be a good age to manifest parrhesia. But we are still reassured: he had enough of his good modern education.<sup>12</sup> to be a child who, while soon would be relieved of everything outspoken (a political parrhesia) could then have it be made available via common rhetoric. Moreover, and as already said by Elias Canetti: "We are pushing the sting of order in the flesh of children."

Michel Foucault gave six lectures on parrhesia at the University of Berkeley in October-November 1983.<sup>13</sup> As he unfolds his fan, his intention, Foucault says, is not to deal with the problem of truth but with the 'teller of truth'. Such parrhesia, which he emanates from the Ancients (so that it serves our modernity), is a mode of 'veridiction', a way of telling the truth. A truth-teller cannot be reduced to a thinker – such was one of the reasons that made me distance myself from thinking at very beginning of this article. *I don't think* so, I write.

That the 'vice sodomite' was called 'sodomy' is not about Pelagius and Abd al-Rahman III. This noun appears for the very first time, used by Pierre Damien far from Cordoba, in Italy, where he published in 1050 his *Liber gomorrhianus*. In the meantime, Pelage's misadventure had bounced all the way to Saxony, in a verse by Canoness Hrotswitha of Grandersheim in which she mentions 'vices sodomites'.<sup>14</sup> In

his work, Damien endeavoured to persuade Pope Leo IX that he had to eradicate this major sin and even depose those who commit themselves to it and so not devote themselves to their ecclesial office (a problem that has become topical again, as we know, since it remains true that 'the erotic' does not lend itself to being channelled).

A broader question is thus evoked: in what way does Christianity leave its mark on modern eroticism? How does this imprint remain significant today where, according to a word from Emmanuel Todd, where what is most present is nothing more than 'zombie Christianity'?<sup>15</sup> If zombified, would Christianity not be ever more present? We find the answer in Pessoa:

When Christianity passed over our souls like a storm that raged into the small hours, people could feel the invisible damage it had caused; however, the ruins it left behind could be fully seen only once it had passed completely. Some thought the ruins were caused by its departure, but it was simply that the damage done was only revealed once it was gone. What was left then, in this world of souls, were those visible ruins, that clear disaster, without the darkness that once covered it with its false affection. Souls saw themselves for precisely what they were.<sup>16</sup>

### The Emergence of a New Approach to Sex

Michel Foucault never ceased to surprise, to astonish (a trait he shares with his contemporary, Jacques Lacan). Although we expect it, surprises also manifest elsewhere. It was hoped that Foucault would continue to develop his once recent study into the relations knowledge/power with, unsurprisingly, his interest in subjectivity with special attention being paid to Fathers of the Church by then turning to the elders. Foucault calls this his "genealogy of the modern subject, which I approach as a historical reality and cultural; that is to say, as something capable of being transformed."<sup>17</sup>

What, then, is the problem in modern eroticism that we do not see? Especially if we consider the inscription of Catholicism. Foucault here consults Clement of Alexandria (150-215) who advocated "a *match* [emphasis added] between the value of marriage and procreative purpose", which implies that the link between spouse must "not be of the order of pleasure and voluptuousness, but of the 'logos'" (logos, here in quotation marks, is taken from Clement of Alexandria). A separation was thus afforded to the erotic which has never ceased to be maintained, reinforced by Catholicism. Recently, in 2021, the Vatican wanted to demonstrate its attachment to *sexual difference* (emphasis added), in its reaction to the draft law (the 'ddl Zan' bill

named after the proposer of it) which aimed to fight against sexual discrimination. The Vatican insisted on its knowing that sexual difference was “a derivative of divine revelation”, consequently it could not be adequately discussed.<sup>18</sup> Difference can lead to a relation between two terms (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division) which produce a third term. The expression of this third term can be such as a child is the productive “difference of sexual relations”.

There is more to Clement of Alexandria as read by Foucault:

Clement integrates a code that he has effectively received from the Hellenistic philosophies into a religious conception of nature, the Logos, and salvation [...]. The kairos of the sexual relationship is defined by its connection to the Logos [...]. Logos is called Savior.<sup>19</sup>

Here is the sexual relation saved by logos! And this is the map that Jacques Lacan has turned around: for him, the sexual relationship is recognized as escaping logos. For Clement of Alexandria, it is important that the sexual relationship is defined by its productive character, that is, the occurrence of beautiful children, the future faithful.

Are these ideas outdated? It is noted that instead of a God, what is now active in many ways in the sexual act is society who also endorses that the sexual act is one which is premised on reproduction. Such pressure comes from girlfriends who are compassionate as well as from wicked women who chorus ‘women’s’ magazines: “So you haven’t yet had a child?” Also, the most common reaction of the medical profession is to assume that all women partake in the sexual act so as to realize a desire to be mothers.

Here Foucault dots the ‘i’s:

Let’s be clear: this is not to say that there has been positive enhancement of the sexual act in Christianity. But the negative value that has been very clearly granted to it is part of a set that gives the subject’s relationship to his sexual activity an importance of which Greek or Roman morality would never have dreamed.<sup>20</sup>

Foucault here meets Lacan (as on many other occasions, including the best-known concerns of what he called ‘speech’):<sup>21</sup>

The Catholic Church affirms that there is a sexual relationship: it is the one that culminates in producing little children. It is an affirmation which is quite tenable, simply it is unprovable. No discourse can sustain it, except a religious discourse in so far as it defines the strict separation that exists between truth and knowledge.

If as a womanizer in his youth<sup>22</sup> who has now 'calmed down', Augustine invents the concept of libido as the "principle of the autonomous movement of the sexual organs",<sup>23</sup> with which Freud found himself reconnecting, without however taking it up as it once was. Since Adam's inaugural disobedience, 'autonomous' refers in the first instance to the phallus (the penile organ, recognized as carrying a value symbolic) who carries knowledge. Knowledge of what? God so willed it as a punishment that deprived man of his own control over his body. We will condense in one sentence the moral of this punishment: "You want to know who the master is in all this? says God. Well now you know! It's me!"

We will therefore be less surprised that Augustine declared himself in his *Confessions* the slave of God. Thereby,

For my remembrance recalls me, and pleasant is it to me, O Lord, to confess to Thee, by what inward goads Thou tamedst me; and how Thou hast evened me, lowering the mountains and hills of my high imaginations, straightening my crookedness, and smoothing my rough ways....<sup>24</sup>

This sweetness is, on occasion, that which is lavished by the whip of God, his 'rough love'.<sup>25</sup> The eroticism of the whip is very present in these *Confessions* (among others: "But you, Lord ... it was your pleasure to correct my deformities in your eyes. You sent me internal shocks. It was unbearable" and, "I understood that you preferred to heal my wounds rather than spare me the blows"). To enjoy God,<sup>26</sup> this master of intimacy,<sup>27</sup> is achieved with Him "coupling beyond the jouissance,"<sup>28</sup> which can only be achieved by renouncing mastery. More measured and without doubt, less situated, Alberto Moravia took note of this loss of control with his sparkling screenplay "Me and Him".<sup>29</sup>

A sexologist will be delighted to find in Augustine such sado-masochism, in which we saw that he had been dismembered. Rather this modern transvaluation of the erotic gave way to the conception of a 'diversity eroticism' relieved of any condemnation that would relate to its components. Many battles are still waged today in favour of such diversity, while others strive to maintain the old division: There are those, the perverts, and us normal people. Thus, recently invented is the

nosographic category of the 'narcissistic pervert', which seems to indicate that modern Western society has still and always needs a foil figure. What else would be the reason, if not to only 'make sense' of everything?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Une difficulté de la psychanalyse", in *L'Inquiétante Étrangeté et autres essais*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, p. 179. Informal English translation: "Here the singularity of our position is to that of the chemist who reduces all combinations to the force of chemical attraction. At the same time, the chemist does not deny the gravitational force, rather it is simply left to the physicist for evaluation."

<sup>2</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, *Isma ou Ce qui s'appelle rien, suivi de Le silence et Le mensonge*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Déclaration à D. Trombadori, Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, t. IV, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Allouch, *La Psychanalyse, une érotologie de passage*, Paris, Cahiers de l'Unebévée / Epel, 1998. *Ainsi que: La psychanalyse est-elle un exercice spirituel? Réponse à Michel Foucault* (Paris, Epel, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> 1995, Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> *Après les Aveux de la chair. Généalogie du sujet chez Michel Foucault*, dir. Sandra Boehringer et Laurie

Laufer, Paris, Epel, 2020; *Bien avant la sexualité. L'expérience érotique en Grèce ancienne*, David Halperin, John Winkler, Froma Zeitlin, Sandra Boehringer [préface et traduction], Jean Allouch [postface], Paris, Epel, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*, op. cit. Jean Allouch, *Le Sexe du maître*, Paris, Exils, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté*, Dits et écrits, op. cit., t. IV, p. 727.

<sup>9</sup> Article paru dans Mark Thompson (éd.), *Leatherfolk. Radical Sex, People, Politics and Practice* (Boston, Alyson Publications, 1991) et traduit par Rostom Mesli dans *Surveiller et jouir. Anthropologie politique du sexe*, Paris, Epel, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Jordan, *The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> On ne le confondra pas avec le Pelage si nettement condamné par Augustin.

<sup>12</sup> Un autre rapport à l'enfant est possible, qui le laisse libre ; celui que j'ai esquissé au chapitre III de mon ouvrage *La Scène lacanienne et son cercle magique* (Paris, Epel, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Il sera aussi question de la parrhésia dans *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres* ainsi que dans *Le Courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II*.

<sup>14</sup> La passion de saint Pelage, le plus précieux des martyrs, qui a été couronné dans son martyre à

Cordoue à notre époque. On pourra se reporter au précieux commentaire qu'en donne M. Jordan dans

l'ouvrage plus haut cité.

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Todd, *Où sont-elles passées?*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Fernando Pessoa, *Le Livre de l'intranquillité*, Paris, Christian Bourgeois, 2004. "Quand, comme une nuit de tempête à laquelle succède le jour, le christianisme s'éloigna des âmes, on vit le dégât qu'il avait invisiblement causé; la ruine qu'il avait occasionnée ne se perçut qu'après son passage. Certains estimèrent que c'était à cause de sa disparition que cette ruine était advenue; mais c'était à cause de son départ que la ruine était apparue, et non pas qu'elle s'était produite. Dès lors, dans ce monde des âmes, la ruine fut visible, le malheur patent, sans la ténèbre pour l'envelopper de son hypocrite tendresse. Les âmes se virent telles qu'elles étaient." English translation of *Book of Disquiet*, edited by Jerome Pizarro and translated from Portuguese by Margaret Full Costa.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, 1981, *Sexualité et solitude*, Dits et Écrits, t. IV, texte 295.

<sup>18</sup> Le Monde du 25 juin 2021, p. 2. Comme souvent ici, le Vatican se donne des airs d'ouverture et de modernité (lutte contre les discriminations) tout en ne lâchant rien sur ses positions.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, Histoire de la sexualité, t. IV. Les Aveux de la chair, p. 23. Afin de ne pas multiplier les notes de bas de page, on indiquera désormais entre parenthèses dans le texte les références à cet ouvrage. Clément d'Alexandrie intègre le code reçu des philosophes hellénistiques dans une conception religieuse de la nature, du Logos et du salut. [...] Le kairos du rapport sexuel se définit par le liende celui-ci avec le Logos. [...] Le Logos est appelé sauveur. English Translation from Foucault, *History of Sexuality, IV*, Translated by Federic Gros, p. 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> Que les choses soient bien claires: il ne s'agit pas de dire qu'il y a eu une valorisation positive de l'acte sexuel dans le christianisme. Mais la valeur négative qu'on lui a très clairement accordée fait partie d'un ensemble qui donne au rapport du sujet à son activité sexuelle une importance à laquelle jamais la morale grecque et romaine n'aurait songé. English Translation from Foucault, *History of Sexuality, IV*, Translated by Federic Gros, p. 201-202.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Lacan, „Le savoir du psychanalyste“, 1971 (site de l'École lacanienne de psychanalyse). „L'Église catholique affirme qu'il y a un rapport sexuel: c'est celui qui aboutit à faire de petits enfants. C'est une affirmation qui est tout à fait tenable, simplement elle est indémontrable. Aucun discours ne peut la soutenir, sauf le discours religieux, en tant qu'il définit la stricte séparation qu'il y a entre la vérité et le savoir.“ English translation from *The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst*, Teaching of June 1972, p. 128.

<sup>22</sup> L'espagnol a un terme pour cela: mujeriego.

<sup>23</sup> Cité par Michel Foucault, « Sexualité et solitude », Dits et écrits, t. II, Paris, Gallimard, 1981, p. 995.

<sup>24</sup> Augustin, Les Confessions de saint Augustin, Paris, Flammarion, 2013, p. 297. Quelle douceur pour moi, Seigneur, de te confier par quels stimuli intérieurs tu m'as littéralement dompté et comment tu m'as nivelé en rabaisant les montagnes et les collines de mes pensées. English translation from *The Confessions of Augustine*, translated by Edward D. Pusey, 1999, p. 110.

<sup>25</sup> French edition, *Ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331. Un accouplement qui arrache de l'appétit du sexe, p. 362.

<sup>29</sup> This is a comedy film of 1973, originally Italian, about a man whose penis develops a separate subjectivity and commands the man how to think and behave.