

James Hooker

Michael Steinmann

Philosophy of Sex and Gender

4 November 2024

Reinventing the Axis of Liberation

In an interview with Jean Le Bitoux, titled “The Gay Science,” Michel Foucault defends his book *The History of Sexuality* by voicing a certain nonconcurrence toward the modern understanding of sexuality as the basis of identity. He says, “In our time... it seems necessary to reevaluate [the very notion of sexuality] or, rather, to make a new evaluation of it. ... There’s a whole psychologism about sexuality, a whole biologism about sexuality, and consequently a possible takeover of sexuality by doctors, by psychologists, by all the authorities of normalization. Against this medico-biologico-naturalist notion of sexuality, isn’t it necessary to put forward something else?” Foucault defends his argument that sexuality as the basis of identity is no longer the most useful “tool in the struggle against all forms of repression” (386), and that better tools must be determined to “expand and solidify” (387) the struggle in new and inventive ways.

Foucault suggests that “a battle cannot always be carried out in the same terms without becoming sterile, immobile, trapped. Thus, a change on the battlefield. And as a result, a change in vocabulary. A change in objectives is absolutely necessary as well” (388). What are these terms of battle that have become sterile? Foucault defines the antiquated modes of liberation as the “notion of sexuality. This was the movement that I was trying to sketch out [in *The History of*

Sexuality], which thus is not a break from the struggles but, on the contrary, is a simple suggestion for an expansion of the struggles and a kind of change in the background, a change in the axis, of the struggles” (388). Foucault suggests this expansion lies in other areas of psychological study, such as “the theme of pleasure, which seems to me to escape these medical and naturalist connotations... After all, there is no “abnormal” pleasure; there is no “pathology” of pleasure” (388). I disagree with Foucault that pleasure is a category of study in which society would find difficult to deem “pathological”, thus suiting it as a better option in liberation strategy. Modern psychology and even philosophy may find this category to be “precisely [the] kind of instrument for establishing the intelligibility of a sexual pleasure and thus for standardizing it in terms of normality” (389) - as Foucault says, “This is rather obvious, it seems to me, in psychoanalysis” (389); but psychoanalysis is not the best mode of liberation to actualize real, lasting change. In order to make an impact on everyday people, who may be unaffected by the proofs of psychology, the method must be paired with palatable dissemination into popular culture (as the understanding of sexual identity has done thus far in history). Foucault himself foresees this shortcoming, and admits that he is not too attached to the theme of pleasure. He emphasizes that either way, the chosen methodological notion must be one “that is not assigned, and is not assignable, to a Subject” (390).

Similar sentiments are echoed in Robin Dembroff’s “Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Kind” in which the author also attempts to redefine the terms of battle for liberation. While Foucault suggests a psychological methodology, Dembroff reconsiders the direct action of social identity with a new definition of genderqueer. Their definition of genderqueer is a “category whose members collectively destabilize the idea that men and women

are discrete, exclusive, and exhaustive gender categories, and do so because of members' felt or desired gender categorization outside this exclusive and exhaustive binary" (12). Such destabilization techniques include "gender neutral pronouns, gender non-conforming aesthetics (cross-dressing, androgyny), gender categorization assertions, queering personal relationships, etc." (18), all action-based modes of liberation.

Focault attempts to redefine the struggle for liberation by looking for psychologisms beyond sexuality and identification, while Dembroff attempts to redefine the psychologism of sexuality *in terms of* a struggle for liberation. The pairing of Foucault's new psychological analysis with Dembroff's dissemination into popular culture via collective destabilization could be the key to a successful liberation strategy - neither can work independently of the other.

Works Cited

Dembroff, Robin. "Beyond Binary: Genderqueer As Critical Gender Kind." Yale University.
2007.

Foucault, Michel, et al. "The Gay Science." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, pp. 385–403.
JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.1086/659351>.