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David Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?" (1989)

Halperin, David M. "Is There a History of Sexuality?" *History and Theory*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1989, pp. 257-274.

In an article that later became part of Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, he responds to and extends Foucault's denaturalization of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality* by applying it to his field: the classics. Acknowledging that Foucault's historical argument is broad and just a sketch, Halperin inaugurates the project of applying Foucault's genealogical method to understanding desire (not sexuality) in other historical periods. Halperin's use of Foucault would go on to spark a debate about queer historiography that continues to rage.

For Halperin, classical antiquity is ripe for this analysis because its notions of sexuality and identity are different from our own, demonstrating Foucault's point that "modern" sexuality is not natural, universal, or transhistorical.

Halperin defines two aspects of modern sexuality that did not exist for the ancients:

1. "the autonomy of sexuality as a separate sphere of existence" (259)
 - Puts forth the now famous idea that pre-modern desire took the form of "acts" rather identities
 - Sex was an act "performed by a social superior upon a social inferior" (260); two roles: insertive and receptive, which corresponded to social roles: citizens and statutory minors (women, slaves, foreigners, boys between puberty and adulthood) (261)
 - Sex was thus not separate from social life but "constituted by the very principles on which Athenian public life was organized" (261)

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- Halperin gives examples demonstrating the "male indifference to the sex of sexual objects" (265)
- Even a passage that would seem to demonize homosexuality (to contemporary readers) is revealed to be fixated not on the "wrong" object choice but on gender deviance (268); and even these people are what we would now consider bisexual (269)
- **Acts vs. identities:** "certain kinds of sexual acts could be individually evaluated and categorized, and so could certain sexual tastes and inclinations, but there was not conceptual apparatus available for identifying a person's fixed and determine sexual orientation" (269)

Criticism

Begins the essay with the assertion that while sexuality is socially constructed, sex "has no history" and "is a natural fact." Foucault shows that sex too is socially constructed.

Makes the major generalization that premodern and non-Western cultures do not conceive of sexuality as such; the purpose of this is to reveal sexuality to be culturally and historically specific to the post-Enlightenment West, but doesn't this gesture risk erasing the specificity of different forms of desire in those space/times? What about groups of people in the West and in the modern era who do not have access to "modern" sexuality as we define it now? (271)

E.g. Sexuality under slavery and its legacy (Hortense Spillers' argument); "premodern" and local sexualities that exist in the west and outside

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