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Sexual Identities, What Are They Made Of? Constructionism, Essentialism, Materialism

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The question I would like to discuss today is: what are the elements in Foucault's work that may help us to understand the historical and current transformations of sexual identities? I will discuss this question as a social scientist. The political question would be: should we try to understand the transformation of sexual identities? Should we transform sexual identities? My point today is not political but scientific.

To handle this question, I will start with Didier Eribon's important study: "Réflexions sur la Question Gay"¹, that opened our eyes on the multiplicity of Foucaults. Eribon distinguishes three Foucaults: the one of *Madness and Civilization*, the one of *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, and the one of *The History of Sexuality Vol. II and III*.

Let me briefly describe these three Foucaults.

In *Madness and Civilization* (1962)², Foucault adopts a rather traditional periodization of sexual transformation. For him the main break took place during the 17th century, when speech got controlled, some speech inhibited, and the speechless confined. This periodization is in line with the Weberian tradition. I may just remind you of the writings of Norbert Elias³

¹ Eribon D. (1999), *Réflexions sur la question gay*, Paris, Fayard

² Foucault M. (1962), *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris, Plon

³ Elias N. (1936-1939), *Ueber den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Basel

and Philippe Ariès⁴ who, a few years before Foucault, developed similar theories on subjects including sexuality. They adopted the same periodization and, moreover, laid emphasis on the same speech control process.

The specific contribution of Foucault is his concept of speech restriction coming from above whereas the Weberian tradition considered it to be a bottom up movement; some kind of a surviving strategy under new political and social conditions. Foucault opposed a type of speech restriction that is closely related to confinement, both being directed top down. Foucault replaces the dialectical model of opposing forces by a structuralist mono-directional model. This brings us to the second Foucault.

In *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*⁵, Foucault maintains the top-down controlled model of sexual construction, but he changes the mechanism: he no longer considers speech to have been restricted, on the contrary, he thinks it has been encouraged and urged on. Restriction becomes production. Consequently, the notion of sexual repression is replaced by the notion of sexual incitation, including the “implementation of perversions”. The top-down model of sexual construction gets exclusively discursive: repression and enclosure are no longer determinant, changing discourses become the main force behind the emergence of new sexualities. And of all discourses, the medical one is predominant.

This also changes the periodization. The main break no longer occurred in the 17th but in the 19th century. Speaking out, and coming out, become part of the top-down model of discursive control.

⁴ Ariès Ph. (1960), *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien Régime*, Paris, Plon. He writes : « Attitudes towards sexuality, and sexuality itself, vary with the environment and consequently with the periods and the mentalities.» (p. 145)

⁵ Foucault M. (1976), *Histoire de la sexualité, I, La Volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard

On the third Foucault I will be brief. Volumes II and III of *The History of Sexuality*⁶ move away from the question of how sexual transformation occurs in society. These volumes explore moral issues and describe how ancient and early Christian societies considered sexuality, not how this sexuality was constructed. Eribon understands this turn to ethics as the consequence of a totally different concept of sexual history. Foucault would have moved to an essentialist point of view: sexual construction would have been more or less constant in history; only the way people think of it, its moral organization would have changed.

Eribon may be right, but I think we should understand Foucault's third attitude more cautiously as the scrupulous application of Boswell's agnostic hypothesis⁷ on the biological, psychological or social determinants of sexual orientation. An agnosticism that includes the possible historicity of sexuality. Indeed, if we don't know how sexuality is constructed, how much is biological, psychological or social, then we are equally ignorant on the question of how much is historical and even if there is any history in it at all. I will come back to this later. Let us just conclude on the third Foucault that his ethical turn may be consistent with an essentialist view of unhistorical sexuality.

Let us come back to the question: how can Foucault help us to understand the historical and current transformations of sexual identities? To deal with this very broad issue, I would like to highlight five aspects.

1 - Consciousness.

Sexuality is made up of many different elements: physical attraction, fantasies, preferences, practices, self-identification. One of the aspects that differentiate these elements is their

⁶ Foucault M. (1984), *Histoire de la sexualité, II, L'Usage des plaisirs*, Paris, Gallimard

Foucault M. (1984), *Histoire de la sexualité, III, Le souci de soi*, Paris, Gallimard

⁷ Boswell J. (1990), « Categories, Experience and Sexuality », in E. Stein (1990), *Forms of Desire, Sexual Orientation and the Social Constructionist Controversy*, NY & London, Garland Publishing, pp. 133-173

degree of consciousness. Physical attraction is generally admitted to be beyond conscious control. It seems to come to us from the outside, sometimes against our will. We don't control physical attraction. On the other extreme, self-identification always is a conscious act. It looks like it is coming from the inside. Yet, we are not free to choose whatever self-identification we would like to adopt.

In reality, all the elements making up sexuality are produced by ourselves, come "from the inside". And yet, none of them is a conscious, free decision. Sexuality is made up by ourselves, but predominantly as an unconscious construction.

The concept of a predominantly unconscious sexuality, of course, goes back to Freud. Foucault took it in its Lacanian, i.e. linguistic form. According to Lacan, the unconscious is a language. As a result, sexuality, as far as it is unconscious, is a linguistic construction. That is how Foucault may bring back sexual changes to discursive changes.

On the other hand, Foucault also taught us that language is not only powerful but at the same time an object of power. We saw before that the second Foucault modified the first one on the mechanisms through which power organizes the symbolic sphere (exhortation of speech instead of prohibition of speech). Both though, hold on the idea of power relationships organizing the symbolic sphere, and thereby the range of possibilities available for construing one's sexuality. By analyzing the role of power relationships, Foucault showed us the political character of the construction of unconscious sexual identities. The essentialist-constructionist debate sometimes forgot this unconscious dimension of the sexual construction. Too often, it focused on the conscious part of the construction: the way we have, individually and socially, built up gay and straight identities, lifestyles and cultures. As if sexual construction started after sexual attraction, desire, fantasies already having been constructed. The construction Foucault wrote about was exactly the construction of this sexual desire. I think it is important

to come back to this concept of sexual construction as an unconscious, nonetheless political process. Even if the third Foucault seems to have moved away from it.

2 – Permanence.

Remember: homosexuality does not exist, only homosexual acts exist. It was one of the slogans of the Sexual Liberation Movement. The point really was: are sexual attractions, preferences, practices, etc. isolated events in someone's life, or are they all somehow related? Without it being perfectly constant, is there some permanence in someone's sexuality?

As many others at that time, Foucault may say: "Why every day life, every one's life, couldn't become a piece of art?"⁸. This is the "moral" Foucault, the one who thinks of what the future could look like. Not the one who analyses the History of Sexuality, the "implementation of perversions" that he thought of as a real "incorporation", a real construction of the sexual identity. An identity that is with us from day to day, that changes with new experiences, but only slowly and within limits that we are not as free to trace as we would like to.

There have been permanent efforts to intervene deliberately in people's sexual identity. The last reported is Robert Spitzer's "reparative therapy".⁹ He claims results where many others failed. All of these therapies are based on voluntary intervention. But even with the subject's cooperation most efforts fail. This does not mean that sexual orientation/identity does not change. It means that as a rule permanence is stronger than change. It also means that possible change is a process that offers very little grip for conscious intervention. Foucault's injunction did not mean to support these therapeutic interventions. It means to stress the variety of sexual orientations/identities against too rigid categorization. Variety yes, but not fugitivity.¹⁰

⁸ Foucault M., *Dits et écrits*, t. 4, Paris, Gallimard, p. 392.

⁹ Spitzer R. L. (2003), « Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation ? 200 Subjects Reporting a Change from Homosexual to Heterosexual Orientation », *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, vol. 31, n° 5.

¹⁰ Even radical constructionists like Judith Butler agree there is permanence and unconsciousness in sexual identities: "For sexuality cannot be summarily made or unmade, and it would be a mistake to associate

3 – Exclusiveness.

Do sexual attractions/preferences/practices exclude other sexual attractions/preferences/practices? In other words, do some preferences exclude others? In its literal form, the answer is tautologically affirmative. Preferential choice means something has been declassified as not preferential. The exclusiveness may be better formulated as follows: can one be preferenceless? Can one be something like total pervert?

Sometimes bisexuality is supposed to be some kind of lack of preference. It may be admitted for young children, it may be showed off as the ultimate goal of sexual liberation, but it is not considered as a “real” sexual orientation/identity, because we think it lacks exclusiveness. In reality, there is no reason to suppose bisexuals are attracted to all men and women as there is no reason to suppose homosexual men/women are attracted to all men/women. Gender choice is just one of the many features making up someone’s sexual identity.¹¹ Here again, the moral Foucault may have claimed the multiplicity of sexual relations as part of tomorrow’s liberty. Yet, the analytical Foucault will certainly agree with Eribon, when he states that today’s gays and straights will not all be bisexuals tomorrow.

Undoubtedly, exclusiveness is part of our sexual identity. Yet, exclusiveness may be more or less powerful and, most of all, it may fix on features that are not the same for everyone. The more exclusive a feature, the more any possible sexual partner that does not correspond to this feature is excluded.

The exclusive force is not just lack of interest. It is physical aversion, that is hard to overcome. As physical aversion it is part of someone’s sexual orientation. It is the negative

“constructivism” with “the freedom of a subject to form her/his sexuality as s/he pleases.”” Butler J. (1993), *Bodies that matter*, New York, Routledge, p. 94.

¹¹ Stein (1990), op. cit., distinguishes sexual orientation and sexual preferences, the former being reserved to gender choice, the latter to all other features that make up the sexual identity. Gender certainly is a particular feature. Especially in a society where gender roles are defined in a mutual contrast. Nevertheless, bisexuals are there to remind that gender choice is only one of the features making up sexual identities. There is no reason to separate fundamentally sexual orientation and sexual preference.

side of it. If we take the example of gender choice, then we can say that homo-aversion is part of the exclusive heterosexual orientation as hetero-aversion is part of the exclusive homosexual orientation. But we must recall immediately that gender choice is only one of the possible exclusive features, along with age, size, corpulence, and innumerable other physical and psychological features, that we will never get to know in all details, not even for our own sexuality. The point I want to make here is that these features are as various and forceful in aversion as in attraction.

The world would have been a better one if we were able to develop preferences and remain neutral towards everything and everyone else. Unfortunately, the same process that creates attraction creates aversion. Sexual preferences tend to be exclusive in the way that they are made of practices and people we feel attracted to and others that repel us, that we exclude of our sexuality. Exclusiveness is the dimension that goes from attraction to aversion, passing through all thinkable intermediate feelings.

4 – Historicity.

Historicity certainly is one of the main topics in Foucault's work. It is also a topic Foucault has repeatedly changed his point of view on.

When he starts developing his thesis on the emergence of the homosexual in the 17th century, he is close to Philippe Ariès. Foucault's emergence of homosexuality is not very different from Ariès's emergence of childhood. The central point in either concept of emerging new historical figures is the historicity, from a social perspective, of something that the individual experiences as unhistorical and essentialist.

Indeed, historicity is what is really at stake in the essentialist-constructionist debate. And all debaters try to combine the essentialist evidence at the individual level with the constructionist evidence at the historical level. For most of them, the solution is to introduce a

dichotomy in the concept of sexuality itself. Robert Padgug: “ “Homosexual” and “heterosexual” *behavior* may be universal; homosexual and heterosexual *identity and consciousness* are modern realities.”¹² John Boswell: “Does the historical record in fact suggest that premodern patterns of sexuality are fundamentally different from modern ones? [...] Yes and no. [Yes for] public discourse [that is] markedly different from its modern descendants.”¹³ No for sexuality itself that may well have been constant in history. Anthropologists like James Weinrich make the same distinction between “real” sexuality and its social construction¹⁴. From the resemblances between berdaches, hijras and drag queens, three different “social constructions”, he concludes there must be some unhistorical, biological reality of human sexuality behind these historical manifestations.

The examples are numerous. They all start from the concept of sexuality as a two-storey building: a social first floor on a biological basement. There is nothing wrong with this distinction. The question is: what do we put in the unhistorical basement and what on the historical first floor?

Padgug, Boswell and Weinrich put the sexual orientation in the unhistorical basement. Formulated as a methodological stance, it starts as a supposition but will never be refuted. In Boswell’s words: “supposition that there have been in all Western societies “gay people” and non-gay people” ... [supposition] that the rough proportions of Kinsey ... were the same in most populations”¹⁵.

If sexual attraction, preferences, and orientation are unhistorical, what is left over to be historical? For “essentialist” historians like Boswell historicity is limited to the way sexuality is appreciated, positively or negatively, and the way it is organized in lifestyles. The

¹² Padgug R. (1979), « Sexual Matters : On Conceptualizing Sexuality in History », *Radical History Review*, 20, pp 3-23.

¹³ Boswell J. op. cit.

¹⁴ Weinrich J. (1987), *Sexual Landscapes : Why We Are What We Are, Why We Love Who We Love*, NY, Charles Scribner’s Sons

¹⁵ Boswell J. op. cit. P; 137, 172

dichotomy allows to hold on an essentialist concept of sexual attractions and aversions together with a historical concept of sexual lifestyles and self-identification. Surprisingly, “constructionist” debaters may end up with the same kind of dichotomy. Didier Eribon: “One of the definitions that I give of homosexuality ...: a gay or a lesbian is someone who ... has been or knows he/she may be insulted.”¹⁶

According to this rather uncommon definition, the homosexual identity has no relation at all to physical attraction, preference, orientation or activity. It is reduced to consciousness. It starts with the stigma.

Eribon may have good arguments to reduce sexuality to consciousness, but as a logical consequence he must think of a new term for all that is left over: physical attraction, orientation and/or activity. Eribon calls this “gay infamy”. It includes all attraction to one’s own sex that seems to come to us, whether we like it or not. Eribon’s distinction between gay sexuality and gay infamy, does it repeat Padgug’s distinction between behavior and identity? Or Weinrich’s reality and social construction? Gay infamy, is it not constructed, not historical?

Other constructionists, like Judith Butler, would definitely consider gay infamy as historically constructed. She would refute the dichotomy because, to her, as to Lacan, sexual desire itself is constructed. By entering the intelligible world, through a series of identifications and foreclosures, every child constructs its sexual identity together with its social and psychological identity. In this view, there is no place left for universal behavior or naturally structured desire. All sexuality becomes socially constructed, not in the public sphere of lifestyles and stigmatization, but first of all in the private sphere of family-life. And since this private sphere of family-life is itself obviously historical, sexuality cannot be but historical.

¹⁶ Eribon D. (2000), *Papiers d’identité. Interventions sur la question gay*, Paris, Fayard, p. 66

Evidently, Butler's reading of Foucault is right for the first and second Foucault. We are not sure about the third Foucault. Boswell's work on ancient homosexuality seems to have convinced Foucault. In an interview in 1982, he states: "Homosexual conscience definitely goes beyond the individual experience, it includes the feeling to be part of a particular social group. This is an irrefutable fact that goes back to very ancient times."¹⁷

Conclusion: about sexual materialism.

The debate on sexual identities that has been going on over the last decades and to which Foucault has contributed more than any other philosopher, has clarified some aspects, at least to me.

Sexuality cannot be conceived as a mere question of lifestyle based on self-identification. We have to recognize its unconscious and involuntary basement made of multiple desires but also of multiple aversions. Moreover, desire and aversion form some kind of coherent entity that we may call identity. This definition of identity, far from being simple and unshakable, nevertheless includes a part of permanence, of continuity. It is radically different from self-identification, because it is unconscious and involuntary.

I agree with Butler that this identity must be considered as individually constructed in a historical environment. But unlike Butler, I think we must consider it as material. Individually *constructed*, but not *produced*, not *generated* out of nothing. Desire and aversion have some kind of materiality. Unshaped, amorphous, perhaps, but not optional. The construction of desire and aversion is to be seen as a shaping, a modeling more than a creation. And this construction is historical because it uses a historical context. In other times, I would have concluded by saying that sexual constructionism surely is a form of historical materialism.

¹⁷ Foucault M. « Sexual Choice, Sexual Act », reprinted in *Dits et écrits*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, t. 4, p. 320.