

Saint Foucault Essay

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Foucauldian analyses of the gay liberation movement were centered primarily around ideas of resistance, rather than “liberation”. For Foucault, resistance to hegemonic discursive ideas relating to the pathologization, binarization, and categorization of sexuality is crucial in overcoming these elements. Foucault is critical of liberation because understandings of homosexuality -- or more specifically, queerness -- would benefit more from questioning the very underpinnings of hegemony in which liberation could become potentiated -- “Foucault remains critical of sexual liberation discourse in particular, and of discursive reversal in general, as a political strategy, to the extent that it thereby extends, prolongs, and fortifies the regime power/knowledge responsible for constructing the homosexual/heterosexual binarism in the first place” (*Saint Foucault*, p. 58). However, liberation need not always entail the reversal of discourse in its proclivity to pathologize and objectify sexualities departing from an established norm -- resistance is much more fluid in its approach -- it does not merely negate what it contends with -- “Gay liberation is not the upside-down reflection of medical pathologization, nor is it the exact opposite of homophobic stigmatization and oppression. Gay liberation, rather, is a surprising, unexpected, dynamic, and open-ended movement whose ultimate effects extend beyond its immediate tactics” (p. 60). Though it does attempt to uproot oppressive regimes of power/knowledge, resistance involves the creation of new meanings beyond the logic and language of hegemony. Much like how sexuality cannot simply be described away through binaries, categories, essentialism and pathologies -- discourses lending themselves to the formation of the *scientia sexualis* -- sexuality becomes something more unintelligible, flouting established discursive limitations. This is an example in which the discourse of resistance becomes creative in the alteration of strategies in tackling the discourse of homophobia through reversal. Taking discourse and reversing the object-subject relations surrounding it is a creative act of

resistance. Basically, the reversal does more than reversing -- it guides discourse in a new direction, attempting to free it from its brutality.

Halperin interprets Foucault as offering resistance to homophobia through the processes of creative appropriation and resignification, appropriation and theatricalization, and exposure and demystification. These are strategies that are to be employed in the subversion and undermining of heterocentric and homophobic discourses. Homophobia and homosexuality as constructs spark a particular interest for Foucault and Halperin, because they view these constructions as binary oppositions arising out of a relation to normality -- "The heterosexual/homosexual binarism is itself a homophobic production, just as the man/woman binarism is a sexist production. Each consists of two terms, the first of which is unmarked and unproblematized-it designates "the category to which everyone is assumed to belong" (unless someone is specifically marked as different-whereas the second term is marked and problematized" (p. 44). Resisting discursive formations like these (such as with rationality versus madness, man versus woman) can yield benefits in both the practical and theoretical realms. The first strategy involves the reclamation of (usually scientific) language of the oppressed for the oppressed to be transformed "ludicrously into a badge of gay Identity and a vehicle of queer pleasure" (p. 48). One other such strategy for deployment includes appropriation and theatricalization of heterocentric discourse. Instead of engaging with this discourse through the limits of reason, heterosexual discourse is turned over on its head through an ironic means. The content is sensationalized and problematized, much like the way homosexual practices are, implicitly addressing the prudishness and austerity of heterosexuality in a way that doesn't take itself seriously. Lastly, the final means of accomplishing resistance is through exposure and demystification. Halperin states that Foucault "tries to expose the operations of homophobic discourses, to reveal the strategies by which the discourses of medicine, law, science, and religion attempt to find ways of frustrating the political strategies immanent in their deployment, of delegitimizing their claims to authority and dismantling their institutional base" (p. 52). As a genealogist, Foucault makes it his duty to outline

the roles that institutions and discourses have played in minoritizing the subject, isolating variables of “truth” and calling them into question, undermining the credibility of authority. These strategies are all employed with the end-goal of reformulating the discourse surrounding queerness in a way that deploys both oppositional and tactics that are parallel to the ones used by authority. I take these strategies to be effective and indispensable to the task of developing theory, and subsequently, praxis as a whole. Much like Halperin, I admire Foucault's reluctance to offer concrete answers to political questions of action, and his strategic aptness. I think that Halperin does hold a plausible view of Foucault on these points, and if we are invoking notions of credibility and authorship in a world dichotomized around truth and falsity, Halperin, a gay historiographer, is likely among one of the most “qualified” to speak on the subject of Foucault, a gay historian. Foucault’s choice to pit strategy against strategy renders his theories all the more influential. His continued engagement with the topical facets of queer existence help to underscore his influence. I think that these forms of resistance are ingenious in some ways because through their employment, they take traditional discourse and turn it over on its head in a manner most ironic, seamless, and empowering. What was once the object of discourse now becomes the subject, imbued with greater agency and understanding of their own discursive positionality, as well as the positionality of the oppressor. Halperin makes a good point on behalf of Foucault that you cannot employ the same worldview of applying claims to truth to the subject of homosexuality -- it eludes logic. Therefore, there is no arguing with reason and rationality and the undermining of the internal contradictions of homophobia based on falsities with facts, because homophobic logic (or lack thereof) will always find a way to twist accepted knowledges to fit a discursive and political mould. Foucault’s extensive contributions to this idea of power/knowledge is consistent with Halperin’s presentation of such an idea, and even though Foucault is not exempt from criticism, Halperin does a good job at ensuring ideological and ethical consistency on behalf of Foucault (especially in the way he describes the ethicality of his political involvements).