Sexual Liberation and the Possibilities of Friendship

Foucauldian Proposals and Anarchist Elaborations

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The philosopher and historian Michel Foucault was not known for offering practical advice. But in a series of interviews from 1981 and 1982 he focused on the major questions then facing the gay liberation movement.

His remarks from that time offer prescient guidance–and pose substantive challenges–for those concerned with sexual liberation today. Though he spoke from his position as a gay man and addressed his comments primarily to a gay audience,

Foucault saw that struggle as having broad implications. He said:

> "I think that there is an interesting part to play, one that fascinates me: the question of gay culture… I mean culture in the large sense, a culture that invents ways of relating, types of existence, types of values, types of exchanges between individuals which are really new and are neither the same as, nor superimposed on, existing cultural forms. If that's possible, then gay culture will be not only a choice of homosexuals for homosexuals–it would create relations that are, at certain points, transferable to heterosexuals… By proposing a new relational right, we will see that non-homosexual people can enrich their lives by changing their own schema of relations." (Oct. 1981, 159–60).

He seems to have understood this freeing, this broadening of the social and sexual landscape, not only as a possible effect of the gay liberation movement, but as a strategy and responsibility: "We must escape and help others to escape the two readymade formulas of pure sexual encounter and the lovers' fusion of identities." (April 1981,137).

Escape, yes, but escape to what? Foucault pointed us toward–not a new institution or a new ideal–but a range of possible relations modeled on a very elastic understanding of friendship. To see why his hopes took precisely this form, it is important to understand Foucault's critique of the existing society–not just the barriers he wished to remove, but also the gaps and discontinuities that he wanted to see filled or bridged.

GAY RIGHTS AND STRAIGHT MARRIAGE

In his October 1981 interview with French gay magazine *Gai Pied*, Foucault suggested, in quite explicit terms, that the "battle for gay rights" was simply "an episode" in a larger, longer revolution, and that it "cannot be the final stage." To truly succeed it must look beyond the law–either as protection or as prohibition–and address the deeper cultural norms, ethical categories, and emotional practices that ground and limit our sexual choices:

> "[A] right, in its real effects, is much more linked to attitudes and patterns of behavior than to legal formulations. There can be discrimination against homosexuals even if such discriminations are prohibited by law. It is therefore necessary to struggle to establish homosexual lifestyles, existential choices

in which sexual relations with people of the same sex will be important. It's not enough as part of a more general way of life, or in addition to it, to be permitted to make love with someone of the same sex… It's not a matter of integrating this strange little practice of making love with someone of the same sex into pre-existing cultures; it's a matter of constructing cultural forms." (Oct. 1981, 157).

This deeper level of engagement is necessary because, in short, there is more wrong with the "pre-existing culture" than its exclusion of homosexuality. It also limits the practices, relations, and desires of heterosexuals, restricting and regulating them in ways that might not even be apparent to those who are so constrained:

"In effect, we live in a legal, social, and institutional world where the only relations possible are extremely few, extremely simplified, and extremely poor. There is, of course, the relation of marriage, and the relations of family, but how many other relations should exist, should be able to find their codes not in institutions but in possible supports, which is not at all the case!" (Oct. 1981, 158).

If the problem with the existing institutions–marriage and the family most prominently–lies not just in their exclusive and discriminatory nature, but also with the poverty of the lives led by people within them, then it is obvious that merely liberalizing those institutions, making them more inclusive and less discriminatory, will not be enough. Worse, such liberalization may actually reinforce the cultural and conceptual hegemony of those institutions and help preserve their (unique) claims to legitimacy. The marriage form can be expanded to include previously excluded groups (once, interracial couples; now, same-sex couples)–so long as they can accept its most fundamental norms. We end up with gay marriages alongside straight marriages, but marriage itself remains and is strengthened in its position as the ideal type for acceptable relations.

The social control of sexuality operates less through direct prohibition or even conscious discrimination than through the naturalization of the model of the heterosexual marriage. "Successful" relationships, as if by definition, lead to marriage, and the norms of marriage reach backward, so to speak, and write themselves into the earlier stages of the relationship. Even where the legal and religious formalities are absent, our relations are seen as "respectable," "serious," or even "real" only to the degree that they resemble marriage, and exactly to the extent that they incorporate its key features: primarily, monogamy and the presumption of permanence; and, to a lesser extent, shared finances, cohabitation, and perhaps child-rearing. The marriage form is presented as the given, as the premise, and society structures its expectations, its supports and its privileges, accordingly.

Surely there are other ways to live, and other ways to share our lives. It is not at all clear why any one type of relationship should predominate and be backed with extensive social and legal privileges. It is less obvious still why it should be this type, which, by its own minimum standards so regularly fails. (According to the Department of Health and Human Services, in the US, 20% of first marriages end in divorce or separation within five years; 33% in 10 years; and 43% in 15. The remainder, of course, are blissful and fulfilling for everyone involved.)

This is not to say that people–gay or straight–shouldn't get married. But by making access to marriage the issue, we reinforce the monopolistic position of the institution. What other relationships, what other ways of life, do we implicitly de-legitimize? What other options do we trade away or rule out? Foucault concludes:

"[I]f you ask people to reproduce the marriage bond for their personal relationship to be recognized, the progress made is slight. We live in a relational world that institutions have considerably impoverished. Society and the institutions which frame it have limited the possibility of relationships because a rich relational world would be very complex to manage. We should fight against the impoverishment of the relational fabric." (Oct. 1981, 158).

To do that, he says,

"We have to reverse things a bit. Rather than saying what we said at one time, 'Let's try to re-introduce homosexuality into the general norm of social relations,' let's say the reverse–'No! Let's escape as much as possible from the type of relations that society proposes for us and try to create in the empty space where we are new relational possibilities.'" (Oct. 1981, 160).

FRIENDSHIP AND EROS

The problem of our rather austere emotional, sexual, and thus social, possibilities–as Foucault saw it–could be answered in part by turning our attention to what he called "the problem of homosexuality."

Homosexuality, in Foucault's view, does not describe a species of person, but an area of activity–sexual, social, cultural, and therefore, political. The question facing the individual, then, is not whether one is a homosexual, but how to become homosexual, how to enact and establish homosexuality. "Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, 'What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?'" The issue is not one of discovery so much as creation. "The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships." This "multiplicity" already draws one away from heterosexual norms, centered as they are on the ideal of marriage. Instead, "The development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship." (April 1981, 135–6).

The difference is precisely that gay relationships lack the institutional frame that gives the straight relationship its structure and its meaning. Where straight relations, as Foucault saw them, are over-written with social significance, gay relations suffer a sort of existential blankness. Society forces an interpretation on each: it imposes a meaning on the straight relationship, and denies the possibility of meaning for the gay one–for all deviations, really. Hence the "two readymade formulas"–the emotionally (if not literally) anonymous "pure sexual encounter" and the total "fusion of identities"–each, in its own way, dulling and confining.

The place of marriage in our social system is premised on the social and legal de-legitimation of other possible arrangements and the cultural denial of the possibility for fulfillment and meaning in other contexts. Society has developed an area of sexual (specifically, heterosexual) normativity, and posited a void beyond its borders. Deviance, then, is not merely prohibited but, in a sense, negated. It is viewed as empty, read as meaningless, rendered absurd. Desires that cannot be molded into the socially prescribed form are defined, as it were, negatively. They are read, not as positive manifestations of human sociability, love, or joy, but as sin, crime, sickness, or nonsense.

Yet it is exactly this void, the "empty space[s]" beyond the norm, where meaning is indeterminate or denied, that Foucault recommends we seek out and occupy–not in the spirit of exile, but in that of exploration. The sense of negation must be overcome, but it cannot be overcome by incorporating outlying areas into the already existing field of meaning. Instead, it must be overcome through creation, which is precisely the practice of freedom. Such creation, Foucault suggests, is an indelible aspect, for example, of an encounter between "two men of noticeably different ages":

> "[W]hat code would allow them to communicate? They face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other. They have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship: that is to say, the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure." (April 1981, 136).

What sort of friendship is this, that defies definition and remains "formless," that is founded on attraction and practiced as mutual pleasure? It bears a striking resemblance to the feminist poet Audre Lorde's idea of the erotic. In a 1978 paper titled "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," she wrote,

> "The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.
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> "Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.
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> "That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for

> joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called marriage, nor god, nor an afterlife." (56–57).

If we take this parallel seriously, how does it change our conception and categorization of friendship? Of the erotic? Of love? Of sex?

The first thing we notice is that all of these terms–and the complex, and sometimes ambiguous, set of ideas, feelings, and practices that they describe–become, in a sense, secondary to and subsumed under the more crucial concern for intimacy. And with this in mind, it becomes clear that it won't be enough to hold stable our existing categories of friendship and the erotic, merely adding one into the other. Instead we must use the expansive idea of pleasure to broaden our view of each type of relationship, each area of life, until they draw toward each other and the distinctions begin to blur. They do not need to become identical, but as the differences become increasingly vague, they also become increasingly trivial. Then the stereotyped categories and false dichotomies–friend or lover? gay or straight? man or woman?–also largely disappear, and many of our prescribed roles with them. Our relationships at last become what we always meant them to be–unique, individuated, characterized by our own pleasures, desires, attractions, and commitments, to be defined or improvised as we please.

ELABORATIONS

If Foucault's arguments maintain their relevance for a gay audience they also present important insights, and real challenges, for other sexual dissidents, including lesbians and bisexuals, the transsexual or transgendered, the aromantic, asexual, or celibate, and the non-monogamous or polyamorous. His chief lesson was that we should not simply adapt existing institutions to accommodate our present desires, but seek out new ways of relating and (perhaps) create new forms of pleasure outside of those institutions, at their margins, or in their unguarded interstices. That does not, of course, suggest that institutions are unnecessary or irrelevant. But it does recommend a large dose of caution when developing, reforming, or maintaining them.

In a 1982 interview Foucault was asked: "What kind of institutions do we need to begin to establish, in order not just to defend ourselves but also to create new social forms that are really going to be alternative?" He replied:

> "Institutions. I have no precise idea. I think, of course, that to use the model of family life, or the institutions of the family, for this purpose and this kind of friendship would be quite contradictory. But it is quite true that since some of the relationships in society are protected forms of family life, an effect of this is that the variations which are not protected are, at the same time, often much richer, more interesting and creative than the others. But, of course, they are much more fragile and vulnerable. The question of what kinds of institutions we need to create is an important and crucial issue, but one that I cannot give an answer to."

Instead Foucault endorsed, in his characteristically abstract manner:

> "one of the developments of the sixties and seventies… certain institutional models have been experimented with without a program. Without a program does not mean blindness–to be blind to thought… being without a program can be very useful and very original and creative, if it does not mean without proper reflection about what is going on, or without very careful attention to what's possible." (June 1982, 171–2).

Elsewhere he puts the point differently:

> "[T]he idea of a program of proposals is dangerous. As soon as a program is presented, it becomes a law, and there's a prohibition against inventing. There ought to be an inventiveness special to a situation like ours and to these feelings… The program must be wide open… We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces." (April 1981, 139–40).

What Foucault recommends is, in effect, an ethic of engaged, critical creativity, which he sometimes refers to as an ascesis–"the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the self appear which, happily, one never attains" (April 1981, 137)–along with a politics of strategic improvisation and almost total autonomy. Freedom is not about perfect satisfaction, but about exploring the possibilities. And the process of liberation is precisely that of expanding the area of the possible.

Why should we codify our desires, our pleasures, our feelings, relationships, and sexual practices into a static form, either an institution or an identity? Must liberation take the form of winning legal rights and social recognition, and must that necessarily close off further possibilities? Shouldn't the emphasis be on opening space for new practices, developing new patterns, and exploring new ways of being–being ourselves, and being together?

It is this sort of questioning that leads to the interest in friendship, whether as a metaphor for or as a model of the new relations we seek to create. There is no institution of friendship. There is no one form it is expected to take, no paradigm or single set of criteria. There is only a diverse collection of friendships, resembling one another more or less, gathered for the sake of convenience under a single heading. This indeterminacy provides a certain freedom: we may craft our friendships according to our own desires, and those of our friend. There is no one course the relationship is expected to follow, no ideal by which it must be evaluated, no pre-ordained telos that it must pursue. There is no requirement that it fit neatly into some type, no assumption that it can be easily understood or described. Friendships are not expected to be alike, or to compete. There are, among the forms of friendship, varying degrees of closeness, commitment, and flexibility. Its borders are wide, its frontiers expansive. There is much room for exploration, experimentation, even play. And if some of its forms fail, that is no reflection on the others.

This leaves us with the challenge of creating institutions–or, if "not… institutions" then "possible supports"–for this sort of innovation and inventiveness; social arrangements that promote, in a word, freedom. What we need are institutions that will support our relationships without institutionalizing our relationships–that is, without prescribing the forms they take or regulating the complex manifestations of love, desire, and pleasure. We need to find a way to share our lives without reproducing the model of heterosexual marriage.

A good step forward would be the de-coupling of sexual-romantic ties from the presumption of financial obligations (on the one hand) and legal rights (on the other). Why, after all, should your sex life have any bearing on your right to immigrate, your access to health care, your pension, your housing, the taxes you pay, or the inheritance of personal property? Of course, it would undoubtedly be more difficult to regulate these aspects of capitalism without something like the institution of marriage–but so much the worse for capitalism! Doesn't this difficulty actually say less about the importance of marriage than about the inadequacy of our other social supports? Rather than privileging marriage in the context of immigration-control or economic scarcity, it would be better to address the broader social, legal, and economic contexts in ways that reduce the significance of the marriage institution and convert its privileges into generalizable rights, both individual and relational. The personal is political, after all–though, of course, we value love over laws.

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