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Michel Foucault on Freedom and the Politics of Experience

I believe that in our (society) the relationship between power, right and truth is organized in a highly specific fashion . . . we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function.

-Michel Foucault

Foucault contrasts his critique of power with the analysis of truth in such a fashion that the former becomes deprived of normative yardstick it would have to borrow from the latter . . . when critique turns against itself so that all rational standards are called into question, then one is caught in a performative contradiction.

-Jurgen Habermas

The question of institutions we need to create is a crucial issue, but one I cannot give an answer to.

- Michel Foucault

For those of us who spend our academic and vocational energy searching for a set of political principles and foundations capable of increasing democratic participation and redressing social and economic inequalities, the experience of reading Michel Foucault can be felt as something akin to an existential crisis. I imagine that, for quite a few of us, Jurgen Habermas's condemnation of Foucault's analysis of truth (or condemnations similar to it) can appear as an anchor in the "presentistic, relativistic, cryptonormative" storm that first reading of Foucault can cause in our consciousness. And many of us cling to that metaphorical anchor. At least I did.

When I first grew interested in social theory, I was frustrated both with the depoliticized, lifestyle-oriented ethics of my peers and the politically quietist, conservatively normed nature of the work available for me in the social services. As such, I encountered Foucault's work as both a threat and a tool. I experienced his work as a

threat because the premises so essential to his philosophy and methodology – a refusal to engage in movements that made global claims, a concern with ascetic development of the self over solidaristic development of communities and a(n apparent) dismissal of the legitimacy of normative truth claims - challenged both the plausibility and the ethics of my interest in resurrecting mass-based redistributive political coalitions, emancipatory pedagogy and more robust notions of citizenship. I felt indicted by Foucault, in two ways. First for being a naïve, antiquated theorist of politics (having not yet, myself, “cut off the head of the king” to take a closer look at the body politic). I also felt indicted for conspiring to create a left-wing power-knowledge regime not terribly different from the right. I began to see my desire to educate others to be more political and resistant as yet another attempt to close off spaces of autonomy and self-creation for others and pass off my notions of justice and moral behavior as yet the newest way to “force others into freedom”. I also felt discombobulated by what I saw as his unhelpful, fast and loose play with the term “truth”. When reading sentences like “Truth is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint”, I was ready to use Habermas’s “yardstick” analogy as sufficient reason to abandon my efforts to understand Foucault.

But however defensive he made me feel and however much I was repelled by his seemingly self-absorbed and elitist “way out” of immaturity, I was still fascinated by his capacity to explain the ways in which power worked. Foucault illuminated the complicity of social sciences with mechanisms of (rather than the possible structural reasons for) social control and discipline more concretely and imaginatively than any thinker I had previously read. At times, I felt the power dynamic I was attempting to explain in papers could be captured with references to “panoptinicity” and “power as productive (not just repressive)”. But employing those concepts felt a bit like acting in bad faith given the permission I gave myself to dismiss the methodological and

philosophical implications of the perspective that yielded these helpful insights.

But after the first shocking encounter, it pays to revisit Foucault. After reading interviews with questioners challenging him in ways that resonated with my own intuitive, less articulated problems with his work and re-reading “What is Enlightenment?”, his most positive articulation of what a modern political and philosophical ethos could look like, I feel more awe and sympathy than disdain when I read “Truth and Power” and I no longer cling to Habermas to credential my fear-based responses with the mystique of philosophical consistency. I am not writing about a conversion experience because I have not become a full-fledged disciple. I still object to Foucault’s overdone devaluation of large political organizations, his flippancy about the role states can play in guaranteeing (rather than depriving) freedoms and the insufficient capacity of his philosophical ethos to engender social movements broad enough to substantially reduce human misery. But the interviews have reminded me of both my place in political history and Foucault’s. They have pulled me away from seeing Foucault as a saint of the depoliticized, navel-gazing nineties and led me to see his evasion of class politics and his extreme rhetoric about truth as a defiant reaction to the unimaginative, oppressive dogmatism of thought on the left in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Now my inclination is to be far more ameliorative than dismissive in discussing my objections.

But more important than revealing a way to negotiate my differences with Foucault, the readings have given me a new way of viewing freedom – an active, experiential approach that resists liberal smugness and complacency, deluded desublimation fantasies or slips into authoritarianism. And since most political theories (and styles of living) I have encountered seem to slide off into one of these evils in their approach to freedom, Foucault’s thought here is especially worth exploring. Moreover, when we place his concept of freedom back in the context of his overall political thought,

I think we can find a very pragmatic, hands-on strategist in Foucault rather than the paralyzing relativist he is often cracked up to be. So it is his understanding of a substantive freedom – one that is not purely a product of consensual authority nor merely a passive state - that I hope to discuss in this paper. Understanding Foucault’s concept of freedom is central to experiencing the rest of his work. To unpack the political and ethical implications of this concept and to explore how it corrects some misgivings we may have about his political theory even as it generates others - I have decided to write on a few themes rather than pursue one thesis in this paper. In a fairly rigorous paper format, I will explore Foucault’s interest in S & M as a practical extension of his concept of freedom. I will also attempt to show how his concept of freedom is consistent with his theory of power and defend it as a worthwhile supplement to liberatory ideas of freedom. The second theme, an exploration of the tactical weaknesses of Foucault’s ethics and politics, will be more fragmentary both because I do not wish to make the “institutionalist” and “truth criteria” arguments others have made before and because I would like to more fully “experience” Foucault. In other words, I already know what my reservations are; and though I wish to note them, I want to be more expansive about the strength and novelty of Foucault’s approach to see if I can better understand why, despite these reservations, his work resonates with me so. I list the paper and fragment titles here at the beginning:

The Paper: Having an active experience of freedom – Foucault’s S & M and the struggle to check the dangers of truth claims and the repressive hypothesis

The Idea / Fragment: Effective Collective Action vs. Foucault’s Philosophical Ethos of Modernity, or the Dangers and Limits of Foucaultian Critique

Having an active experience of freedom – Foucault’s S & M and the struggle to check the dangers of truth claims and the repressive hypothesis

We might expect any discussion of repression to lead back to a conversation about freedom. What is repression, after all, if it is not what one does with an impulse or instinct when one lacks the freedom to act on it? The word “truth” may not be as readily associated with freedom as “repression” is, but as at least one time revered maxim (“Know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”) reveals, the presence of the latter is usually seen as dependent on the existence of the former. So we might also expect “freedom” to pop up in most discussions of “truth”. But Michel Foucault’s reflections on the “repressive hypothesis” and “truth” are perhaps most famously regarded and academically used not for what they tell us about freedom, but what they tell us about the nature of power. There is good reason for this.

Strategically speaking, an understanding of power as that which represses what we might do in its absence (and illegitimate power as that which represses our ‘nature’ or ‘essential humanity’ for no socially just reason) only takes organizers and students of politics so far. Sometimes it even takes them in the wrong direction. For instance, straight men in 1960s era anti-war movements may have thought they were liberating themselves from bourgeois hypocrisy by being more sexually expressive; but what some could not account for is that this emancipatory behavior sometimes constituted a series of power plays that placed women at a disadvantage. Similarly, an overriding concern with verifiable truth, usually expressed in scientific terms, risks doing more strategic harm than good. As Foucault notes in his “Two Lectures”, a wide range of “historical contents” and “subjugated knowledges” have been “buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or

formal systemisation.”¹ Thus, when Marxists strain to show that their schools of thought have “a rational structure with verifiable procedures”, they are lending more credence to the idea that only scientists speak the truth and further delegitimizing people with “naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy” whose interests they purport to defend.²

By unveiling power at its most robust – when it not only tells us what we cannot do, but positively shapes what we want to do (through a constant, specific therapeutic discourse linking pleasure to sex), what helpful authorities we should look to (by creating a privileged, centralized, and supposedly neutral domain of scientific endeavor) and what physical habits to adopt (through surveillance - a system of repression *and* incitement) - Foucault offers us two valuable insights for oppositional politics. First, he reminds us that emancipatory politics and programs inspired only by ideas of desublimation and the “empty dream of freedom” can easily feed into a network of power arrangements that guarantee individuals no more (and often less) space for creative autonomy than before the ‘struggle for liberation’ began.³ Secondly, by “mak(ing) positive mechanisms appear where ordinarily the negative”, legal and prohibitive mechanisms of power are stressed, he reminds us that power (as technology, strategy and relations) never leaves us.⁴ Thinking we can make power disappear, he reminds us, stifles our capacity for resistance precisely at moments when new and more resilient regimes of power emerge.

Strategically useful as these insights are for those who struggle for marginal causes and ways of life, I would guess it is just at this point – just when Foucault lays out this

¹ Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures” in Power/Knowledge, pp. 81-2

² Ibid.

³ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in The Foucault Reader (ed. Paul Rabinow), p. 41.

⁴ Michel Foucault. “Power Affects the Body” in Foucault Live, p. 207.

concept of power, points out the dangerous simplicity of the repressive hypothesis and makes previously authoritative truth discourse more fragile and subject to our intervention – that many readers lose the existential incentive to make any use of them. Some readers may simply decide that social sciences and truth claims are authoritarian frauds and feel they are made free by disengaging from them altogether. Others may encounter Foucault’s thesis on power as too much a threat to their faith in building a more rational society. This audience may feel compelled to condemn him as anti-modern and affirm the truth of social sciences and the therapeutic benefits of many institutions.

And there is yet another response that is both more subtle and less drastic than the first two, but no less troubling. In fact – this response may be *more* troubling precisely because of its refusal to make the reductive moves of the others. Taking his analysis of received truths too seriously to dive uncritically into science or service professions but being unwilling to abandon humane aims, some of us may feel stuck. We may be left paralyzed with fear that our utopian ideals or programs for reform are both vain in their inability to change power arrangements and dangerous in their tendency to only further elaborate modern society’s disciplinary grid. For example, an advocate of more egalitarian funding for public education may decide that the carceral style in which education is provided might only be further legitimated if his aim of egalitarian funding was achieved. We may dismiss these first two reactions and admit attacking them would only be going after straw men. But this third reaction deserves our attention both because it takes Foucault more seriously and because the rigor of this perspective seems to be exactly what leads it, unlike the other two less reflective responses, to paralysis.

To contest this paralyzed response, we could borrow from Foucault’s “Two Lectures” to argue the reaction stems from a misguided application of a juridical / liberal concept of freedom to a more technical / strategic concept of power. And while this line

of criticism has merit, we should pause before employing it to consider how effective an analytical argument will be at dispelling paralysis, a state more affective and experiential than cognitive. Moreover, we might want to note that this sense of paralysis and disruption seems to be exactly what Foucault wished for his readers to experience. Recalling how prison guards and social workers had reacted to Discipline and Punish, saying the book was “paralyzing” and that “it blocks us, it prevents us from continuing our activities”, he argues this proved “the success of the work, proves it worked as I had wanted it to.”⁵ This sense of triumph Foucault expresses at a reaction of shocked indecision should not be seen as proof of his sadism. Disruption and paralysis may be a reaction he seeks to elicit from us, but it is not the final aim of his work. As he indicates in one interview Foucault seems bent on effecting us, and himself, in some other way:

I aim at having an experience by passing through a determinate historical content – an experience of what we are today, of what is not only our past but also our present. And I invite others to share the experience. That is, an experience of our modernity that might permit us to emerge from it transformed. Which means that at the conclusion of the book we can establish new relationships with what was at issue.⁶

Still this statement still begs the question of how this anxious indecisiveness some of us feel when we read Foucault is supposed to give way to transforming ourselves and our relationship to the present instead of slipping into passive nihilism or smug rationalism.

As a rhetorical way to answer this question, I would argue that Foucault shocks us first into paralysis, but then into thinking and caring for ourselves. The first, paralyzing shock comes in those texts he devotes to theorizing social power (Discipline and Punish, Power/Knowledge and The History of Sexuality, Volume I). There he posits that our modern understanding of freedom as a release of desire has been fused into modern disciplinary mechanisms that largely give shape to those desires. And because he

⁵ Foucault, “How to Write an Experience Book” in Remarks on Marx, p. 41.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 33-34.

believes this seemingly totalizing disciplinary social grid that incorporates both repression *and* desublimation acts as the main obstacle to caring for our bodies and minds, his aim in these texts is to have us experience the poverty of our freedom in this arrangement. There he also makes a persuasive case that we are as unlikely to undo (and as likely to reinforce) society's disciplinary grid by searching for some bedrock truth to ground society on as we are by pursuing a master plan of desublimation. This is because "the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true" are "produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses."⁷ This is what induces paralysis in many of us. Deprived of truth claims and calls to liberation to launch a more just society many of us would conclude, as Foucault's reductively anti-rational disciples and reductively rationalistic adversaries do, that if he is correct, then power is everywhere, freedom is nowhere and resistance is futile.

But if we work more with Foucault and look at his late interviews and "What is Enlightenment?" essay, we find that all is not lost. Here Foucault shows that those truth discourses and emancipation paradigms he "robbed" us of in earlier texts were only lulling us into an immobility far more profound – and more marked by an impoverished notion of agency - than the paralysis he induced in us after said robbery. More importantly, in these texts he offers readers ways out of paralysis (whether he caused it or if it was caused by the ethical docility he says emancipatory and juridical paradigms induce) and ways into a clear-headed awareness of what agency we do have.

He does this by proposing an ethic of freedom that partly replaces and partly supplements more celebrated therapeutic and liberal notions of freedom. This ethic assumes freedom is not what we have in the absence of coercion or in the uninhibited

⁷ Foucault, "Truth and Power" in Power?Knowledge, pp. 131-2.

expression of desire, but what we experience – whatever our constraints - with the choice of changing our obligations and ourselves. This ethic, I argue, provides us the means to conceive a relationship between ethics and politics that allows them to be intertwined without having the former be submerged under the latter; a relationship other notions of freedom do not so easily provide. To reveal this ethic in dimensions I will examine a matter to which Foucault gives considerable attention in these texts – sadomasochistic sex play. I hope, through this reflection, to reveal how his interest in S & M can clarify our understanding of something ostensibly unrelated to it – Foucault’s concern with developing a positive notion of our ethical and political agency. In the process, I also hope to highlight how Foucault’s ethic of freedom overcomes the limits and traps of notions of freedom premised on a repression / liberation dichotomy.

Active freedom: S & M as one of many ethical supplements to the repressive hypothesis

We very often have the experience of much more freedom in foreign countries than in our own. As foreigners we can ignore all the implicit obligations which are not in the law but in the general way of behaving. Secondly, merely changing your obligations is felt or experienced as a kind of freedom.

- Foucault, “An Ethics of Pleasure”

Foucault’s experimentation with sadomasochism and other “limit experiences” may be the most maligned aspect of life and work. The usual jab goes something like “this is Foucault at his self-absorbed worst, donning the mask of the amoral artiste and turning away from solidaristic politics toward a dangerously aestheticized realm of pleasure most would find repellent.” To support this depiction of him as the ostentatious philosopher of dangerous living, he might be cited saying, “I think the kind of pleasure I would consider the real pleasure would be so deep, so overwhelming that I could not survive it.”⁸ But this portrayal is unfair for many reasons. First of all, he is not bragging when he discusses his troubles with pleasure. In fact, he casts it as something of a

⁸ Foucault, “An Ethics of Pleasure” in Foucault Live, p. 378.

disability, saying “I cannot give myself those middle range pleasures that make up everyday life.”⁹ So when says “we must work not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasures” he is urging himself as much as anyone else to make room for life’s less extreme charms.¹⁰

Secondly, this portrayal unjustly puts us at an affective remove from Foucault, using our initially anxious response to S & M to deny us any sense that his experience with sex and pleasure could be at all similar to ours. This is unfortunate because Foucault frequently addresses a feeling many of us have had – the feeling that “normal” sexuality is no less scary in reality than S & M is in our imagination. Many of us once thought sex would introduce a sense of fusion, dynamism and transcendence of boundaries into our relationships. I would also guess that, after sex, many of us not only had our expectations thwarted but also found those post-sex moments distressing if not painfully awkward. Foucault encapsulates this link of sex to sadness or sad circumstances with the French phrase ‘animal triste post coitum’ (after sex, the animal is sad). And this theme of ‘animal triste post coitum’ recurs often in his interviews.

In one conversation he bemoans the cinematic association of eroticism with Nazism, asking if our erotic imagination is so sadly impoverished that the only way we can represent sexual fantasies is “as the end of the world in a concentration camp?”¹¹ Elsewhere he argues “the child has a flow of pleasure for which the ‘sex’ grid is a veritable prison.”¹² But Foucault does more than ruminate on the relationship between sexuality and misery. He also sets out to diagnose the cause of the problem and find a cure. Post-

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” in Foucault Live, p.310.

¹¹ Foucault, “Sade: Sargeant of Sex” in Foucault Live, p. 189.

¹² Foucault, “The End of the Monarchy of Sex” in Foucault Live, p. 219.

coitum sadness may be partially produced by biochemistry, but as he conceives the matter, there are many facets of sexual misery produced by history and discourse, not physiology. And the historical sources for sexual misery Foucault finds include religious demonization of all sexual arrangements outside the scope of sanctioned heterosexual, monogamous pairing and limits imposed on affection and relating by an increasingly rationalized and administered society - but his list goes beyond these, the usual suspects. In fact, Foucault's list includes those who, before him, posited a relationship between sexual misery and history and struggled against it. Those who thought sexual misery resulted from "hypocritical prohibitions" placed on our desires, he argues, only ended up exacerbating the problem:

This type of discourse is in fact a formidable tool of control and power. As always, it uses what people say, feel and hope for. It exploits their temptation to believe that to be happy, it suffices to cross the threshold of discourse and remove a few prohibitions. It ends up in fact repressing and controlling movements of revolt and liberation.¹³

But for Foucault, the battle for freedom from sexual misery has not ended with the failure of Reich, Marcuse and other therapeutic desublimators to free us. Their battle began on the mistaken assumption that we would best treat sexuality as a frustrated desire that needs to be unleashed. Their battle ended, as sexual encounters given too much romantic build-up often do, leaving us dejected and more easily manipulated than before. For Foucault the battle only really gets going when we begin to see sexuality differently:

Sexuality is part of our world freedom . . . something we ourselves create and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it's a possibility for creative life, a process of our having to create a new cultural life underneath the ground of our sexual choices.¹⁴

And it is just this vision of sexuality as creative life – as a constructive attempt to take

¹³ Ibid, p. 219.

¹⁴ Foucault, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity" in Foucault Live, p. 382.

hold of our lives and play some role in our freedom – that those who would stigmatize Foucault for his involvement in S & M overlook.

What they also overlook is the clear, not so scary link between this concept of sexual freedom as self-creation (rather than some mystical self-discovery) and sadomasochistic sex play. Contrary to a misperception that is understandable given the linguistic link between sadomasochistic sex play and the Marquis de Sade, S & M practices (or at least Foucault's experience of them) are not a mere reproduction of the sexual procedures described in Sade's texts. In fact, Foucault explicitly denounces Sade, calling him "an accountant of the ass" who "formulated an eroticism proper to a disciplinary society" that "it is time to leave behind."¹⁵ So the kind of S & M that holds Foucault's interest is not one characterized by cruelty or harm. If anything, S & M comes across as a practice of justice and a "way in" to developing an ethics and subjectivity appropriate to a non-disciplinary society. One way Foucault sees S & M changing one's subjectivity to a non-disciplinary orientation is the way it makes power relations transparent when in one's daily lives they are all too well hidden:

What strikes me with regard to S/M is how it differs from social power. What characterized power is the fact that it is a strategic relation that has been stabilized through institutions. (Through) courts, codes and so on . . . the strategic relations of people are made rigid. On this point, the S/M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Or even when the roles are stabilized, you know very well that it is always a game. Either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tacit, that makes them aware of certain boundaries.¹⁶

So, far from a reproduction of Sade's brutality, Foucault introduces S & M as a kind of therapeutic play with power roles, a play that grants us the fantasy space to imagine subverting those roles, abiding by them only for our own pleasure or creating new ones that better suit us. Consistent with his theory of power, this understanding of sexual

¹⁵ Foucault, "Sade: Sargeant of Sex" in *Foucault Live*, p. 189.

¹⁶ Foucault, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity" in *Foucault Live*, pp. 387-8.

play assumes that some power relations cannot be excised from the interactions. And rather than demand that we delay all pleasure until some space free of power is finally realized, Foucault's version of sadomasochistic sex play calls for us to allow power explicitly into the relations, blunting the fear we may have of it by making its role transparent and known.

In "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act", Foucault makes the just and creative aspects of S & M even more concrete. There he links homosexual S & M practices to the attempt to compensate for the historic inability of gays to participate in courting rituals and other socially sanctioned activities heterosexuals are able to enjoy. As he says, "Since in homosexuality coitus is given immediately, the problem becomes 'what can be done against the onset of sadness?'"¹⁷ And though S & M may have been employed in gay communities to make up for not being able to pursue affective and erotic ties in broad daylight, Foucault envisions these practices extending beyond these communal parameters. He sees it as one way to escape well-codified sexual routines and reinitiate a creative role in their erotic lives. One way S & M reinstates our agency in sex, according to Foucault, is by helping us break from the pattern of expectations – beginning with the standard come on and ending with the standard orgasm – that is all many of us have come to hope from sex:

(S & M features) a relationship that is at the same time regulated and open. It resembles a chess game in that one can win and the other can lose. The master can lose if he is unable to respond to the needs and trials of his victim. The servant can lose if he fails to meet the challenge thrown at him by the master. This mixture of rules and openness has the effect of intensifying sexual relations by introducing a perpetual novelty, a perpetual uncertainty which the simple consumation of the act lacks. The idea is also to make use of every part of the body as a sexual instrument.¹⁸

Perhaps this description of S & M will not persuade most of us to become practitioners.

¹⁷ Foucault, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act" in *Foucault Live*, p. 331.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

But maybe what it can sell us on is the idea that our sexuality, as Foucault says, is a creative endeavor, not a fatality. Maybe it can also help us to create approaches to sexuality outside the tired routine of expecting magical fulfillment from coitus and desperately discovering that those expectations of bliss can never be fulfilled. And this effort to assume some role in creating our sexuality seems quite important if we agree at all with Foucault that both our expectations and ways of fulfilling those expectations are often rigorously codified by numerous disciplinary mechanisms.

So far I have only portrayed Foucault's interest in S & M as a purely sexual endeavor. If this were the limits of what the experience of S & M was for Foucault then perhaps, without assenting to the insensitivity of those who dismiss his exploration of these practices, we could agree with those who dismiss him that it is a matter of little ethical or political importance. "For those seeking a worthy approach to ethical or political life," we might say, "it is better to look somewhere beyond Foucault's meditations on sadomasochistic sex play." But we would still be selling Foucault too short and giving those simple-minded and slanderous criticisms too much credit for at least two reasons.

The first reason we would fail to give Foucault adequate credit with the above characterization is that we would fail to note that the roles he sees S & M playing in the lives of its practitioners cannot be reduced to mere sexual stimulation. In fact, at one point, Foucault describes S & M as "a kind of creation which has as one of its main features the desexualization of pleasure."¹⁹ Were they unaware of what means he was describing to realize this end, there would be a wide range of people who – for ethical or political reasons - would agree with Foucault that pleasure would best be decoupled from, or at least not dependent upon, sexuality. Everyone from left-liberals disconcerted by the

¹⁹ Foucault, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity" in [Foucault Live](#), p. 384.

commodification of sexuality, to moderate feminists who feel oppressively heavy expectations are placed on women to be sexually pleasing to social conservatives who felt the media celebrated sex over development of virtues might sign on to Foucault's project of showing that sex is not the root of all possible pleasure.²⁰ What these normative perspectives all share with Foucault is his sense of the futility in thinking "we 'liberate' ourselves when we 'decode' all pleasure in terms of sex finally brought into the open", when we should instead "be striving toward a general economy of pleasure not sexually normed."²¹ It just so happens that, unlike them, Foucault sees S & M as one way to strive toward a new economy of pleasure and more realistic understanding of our freedom.

But S & M is not *the only* way Foucault thinks we can extract pleasure from the narrow confines of sexuality and give ourselves a broader conception of the opportunities for pleasure the world holds for us. It is also not *the only* way he believes we can extract a sense of our freedom from the narrow confines of the repression / liberation dichotomy. And this is the second reason limiting his reflections on S & M to merely personal musings gives short shrift to Foucault, because the practices of S & M he admires have great resonance with his wider ethical and political thought. Many of his questions with ways we can have greater personal and political agency in social arrangements that make many of our desires and liberatory aims part of a disciplinary program begin to be answered in the virtues he finds in S & M practices. One instance of the resonance between Foucault's reflections on S & M and his ethics of freedom occurs in his reflections on his own role as scholar.

As a writer concerned with both articulating the full dynamism of social control mechanisms and moving his audience to challenge limits those mechanisms imposed on us,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Foucault, "Power Affects the Body" in [Foucault Live](#), p. 212.

Foucault faced two problems. The first was how to have readers enter the traumatic experience of present problems without having them hurriedly shift their thinking toward utopian programs to banish unjust disciplinary mechanisms once and for all. While making such utopian jumps instills a sense of agency and assuages the pain that comes from knowledge of present injustice, performing them can deaden our sense of the strategic stakes of the present moment and weaken our effectiveness as social agents. To counter this potential problem, Foucault's method of scholarship, like S & M, keeps power relations within our field of vision without diverting our attention with solutions that act as some hidden truth. Again, here he wishes to give agents creative control:

I think we have to get rid of that (a call for prophetism). People have to build their own ethics, taking as a point of departure the historical analysis, sociological analysis and so on, one can provide for them. I don't think people who try to decipher the truth should have to provide ethical principles or practical advice at the same moment, in the same book and the same analysis. All this prescriptive network has to be elaborated and transformed by people themselves.²²

Of course, this refusal to act as a prophet gives way to a second problem – the problem of showing us we can not only survive knowing the traumas of the present moment, but that this consciousness will make us more effective social agents. Foucault's solution to this problem also metaphorically echoes the virtues of self-creation he celebrates in S & M.

Like the S & M player who is less concerned with unveiling his sexual truth than fabricating sexuality out of experience, Foucault believes his scholarly work's urgency lies less in "its demonstration of historical truth" than "in the experience (it) permits us to have." And, when he writes on clinics and prisons, the particular experience Foucault aims to give his readers is "a 'limit-experience' that tears the subject from itself."²³ Once again like the S & M participant who discards the unrewarding script of normal sex to

²² Foucault, "An Ethics of Pleasure" in Foucault Live, p. 380.

²³ Foucault, "How to Write an Experience Book", in Remarx on Marx, pp. 31-2.

invent novel pleasures, this limit experience of social discipline is meant to be reinvigorating, not harmful. For instance, in his discussion of prisons, Foucault aims to tear his readers away from the presumptive “equivalence between punishment and depriving people of their liberty,” reminding us “that it is in reality something relatively recent; a technical invention of the 18th century.” The power Foucault gives his reader in investigations of disciplinary mechanisms is the same power the S & M participant gives himself in sex play – the power to deny the “evidentiary status” of certain practices and “give them back the mobility that they should always have.”²⁴

But the individual work of a scholar – where one’s connection to others is important but remote are not the only place he sees the need for approaches that mirror the virtues he finds in S & M. These same virtues show up again in Foucault’s interest in more solidaristic behavior, especially in the approach he advocates to enhancing friendships. When he reflects on the matter of unusual friendships – like the friendship shared by gay men with widely different ages – Foucault indirectly points to the inadequacies of the repressive hypothesis:

Between a man and a younger woman the marriage institution makes it easier: she accepts it and makes it work. But two men of noticeably different ages – what 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 towards each other. They have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship still formless; which is friendship: that is to say everything through which they can give other pleasure.²⁵

We can see in this passage the weaknesses of the repressive hypothesis and the emancipatory ideal from which it stems. The point here is not that the two lovers have been made “free” by their willingness to love someone of the same sex or of a considerably different age. The point here is that, like the romantic who sadly discovers

²⁴ Foucault, “What Our Present Is” in *Foucault Live*, pp. 412-3.

²⁵ Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” in *Foucault Live*, p. 309.

sex with his greatest love has not made him transcendently happy, the younger and older gay men discover that after “freeing” themselves to love one another, the hardest part with the greatest potential for paralyzing sadness has only begun. And in this space where helpful signs and signals are absent and the contingency and ‘constuctedness’ of some of our ‘truths’ about love are revealed, the need to move from an emancipatory ideal of freedom to a creative ideal of freedom is urgent. The need to create meaning and pleasure is not only the work of the morally ambiguous, avante-garde art-fucks some would like to associate with sadomasochism. These lovers’ work of creation is, rather - like the work carried out by Foucault’s sadomasochist who refuses to let the sad limits of normalized sex define his sexuality - experimental. It is the work one does to take an active role in one’s freedom; to go on living, experiencing pleasure and giving pleasure to others when the “truths” and ways of living that provide some measure of comfort to many provide you none.

Returning to the issue I noted at the beginning of this paper – the troubling matter of Foucault’s relationship to issues of political agency – I think we might begin to give Foucault a more positive assessment than we did in the beginning. Rather than seeing his interest in S & M as a symptom of the destructive behavior that goes on when you refuse the repressive hypothesis, I believe we should conceive of it as part of an ethos meant to supplement the limited agency the repressive hypothesis offers us. Consider the matter of revolution; Foucault’s use of S & M as an opposition to centering sexual pleasure on the orgasm serves as a useful analogy to his refusal to center our political hopes on revolution. Foucault never refuses the need for emancipatory projects. In discussing homosexual politics for instance, he argues that the demand for freedom is indispensable. He sees a problem with these demands for freedom only when our sense of political urgency ends with its fulfillment. The revolutionary imagination is dangerous precisely

because it imagines fulfillment coming at a given time. It is dangerous for the utopian or the socialist revolutionary because he denies happiness until the moment of fulfillment – breaking the cardinal rule Foucault borrows from Baudelaire – “you have no right to hate the present.”²⁶ Moreover these “global plans to escape contemporary reality so as to produce programs of (a new) society” lead radicals, always doubting revolutionary fulfillment “only to the return of most dangerous traditions.”²⁷ The revolutionary ideal is equally dangerous for the liberal or economic conservative who believes the time of revolution has already come and, with its fulfillment, comes the complacent urge to pay less attention to the present – both its ongoing injustices and its possibility for further transformation. In both cases there is a kind of misery akin to sexual misery. The revolutionary is like the frustrated suitor whose single-minded focus remains on wedding and bedding his beloved, failing to take advantage of the pleasures of courting. The liberal or conservative is like the stodgy old husband who feels the possibilities for growth and relating have diminished with the disillusion of domestic life and easily fulfilled sexuality.

Against these two sad options for political living, Foucault proposes another that like S & M, restores the novelty and perpetual tension to our lives. And as a model for this option, he proposes Kant’s and his own notion of Enlightenment. The Kant of “What is Enlightenment?” Foucault introduces is not the same Kant who sought a bedrock truth for our actions in the categorical imperative. He is rather a philosopher whose search for what will release humanity from its immaturity only deals “with the question of contemporary reality alone” and only asks “What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?”²⁸ Having the space to express one’s thought is

²⁶ Foucault “What is Enlightenment” in *The Foucault Reader*, p. 40.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p 41.

²⁸ *Ibid*, P. 34.

essential to Kant for becoming enlightened – and in this sense freedom from a certain kind of political repression is essential to enlightenment. But, as Foucault notes, in order to truly reach for enlightenment, we must make a modification of the preexisting relation linking will, authority, and the use of reason.”²⁹ Taking an active role in our freedom is again like S & M or a relationship between a younger and older man in that it removes us from authoritative scripts of what to do and leaves us with our own experimental reason.

But also like Foucault sees S & M, Foucault and Kant see agency as always taking place in spaces of power. Power is never eliminated in either Foucault or Kant’s imagination. And since power never leaves us, the best political and philosophic ethos for generating change begins with what the former calls “a limit-attitude”. This attitude is characterized by a non-ending interrogation of the “contemporary limits of the necessary, that is, what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects.”³⁰ As Foucault notes, under Frederick’s constitutional monarchy, this experimentation with the limits of restraint led Kant to make his primary political question the matter “of knowing how reason can take public form, how the audacity to know can be exercised in broad daylight, while individuals are obeying as scrupulously as possible.”³¹ In Foucault’s own time Kant’s concerns have been developed (though not put to rest) in most liberal democratic countries. But since Foucault’s own present is also one in which a plethora of disciplinary and productive mechanisms have arisen that exert more power over us than Frederick could have imagined, the matter of primary political importance has become “how can we disconnect growth of capabilities from

²⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

³⁰ Ibid, p 41.

³¹ Ibid, p. 38.

intensification of power relations?”³² But in both political milieu’s the willingness to tear oneself away from the expectations of the current regime mixed with the strategic knowledge that restraints imposed by this regime will not be eradicated is judged indispensable by the philosophers. And for Foucault, there is always agency because “the historical analysis of limits imposed on us and experiments with possibility of going beyond them” he calls on us to conduct promises there is always work to be done if we want to take an active role in our own freedom.

Effective Collective Action vs. Foucault’s Philosophical Ethos of Modernity, or the Dangers and Limits of Foucaultian Critique – a few thought fragments

Is the Philosophical Ethos of Modernity Unfriendly to Large Projects of Collective Action?

However much we might appreciate Foucault’s capacity to free us from dogmatism, we might still wonder if the capacity for collective action is diminished by his approach.

- A. One reason for this is that effective collective action often relies on truth claims – like all humans have the need for self-driven labor. But the limit attitude, however wise it may make us about what is no longer necessary for our freedom, never gives us grounds to make value-laden claims that are so central to solidaristic politics. The ethos of modernity never moves us beyond a type of atomized individualism. It is, for better or worse, more liberal than democratic.
- B. Another reason for this diminished capacity for large collective action is that the ethos Foucault articulates undervalues the question of general structures and overvalues local, often personal action. And while this might be an appropriate stimulus to one’s sense of agency against structuralist dogmatism – refusing to take on more general economic structures may mean opting out of a political realm those in which those in control of most disciplinary mechanisms are still quite active.
- C. Other Questions: Does the philosophical ethos of modernity need to be supplemented
by more robust theories of action and justice? Is the tension between critique and solidarity merely a beneficial tension in modern liberal democracy or do we need to more fully inoculate each against the dangers of the other? Is this all that Foucault is doing – preserving the value of free individual thought and practice against the potential for democratic tyranny?

³² Ibid, p. 43.