

HPRS5042/6042 COMPLEX BODIES: QUESTIONING GENDER, RELIGION, & SEXUALITY

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FOUCAULT: TRUTH / POWER / KNOWLEDGE

In the last lecture we examined some of the foundational aspects of the work of Michel Foucault, particularly the way in which he sees truth, power, and knowledge interacting.

We covered the nature of truth, and power's role in shaping our knowledge of it.

In this lecture, we will examine the set reading in more detail, as well as the way in which Foucault's work extends beyond our previous consideration into other areas.

READING



READINGS

Your set readings for the preceding two sessions have been four chapters of the book “Understanding Foucault” – an excellent introductory text if you are interested in exploring his work further.

The nature of this module is theory heavy and as such we will spend a significant amount of time in this session going through the set readings – please make sure you complete them after each session.



QUESTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

1 – What is going on in this passage?
Why does it resonate with Foucault?

2 – What does the differing taxonomy
do to our own assumptions about
knowledge and categorisation?

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—*our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things . . . This passage quotes a ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies’. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing that . . . is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*. (1973: xv)

QUESTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

1 – What is it that epistemes allow us to do?

2 – Why is this important (biologically? socially? psychologically?)

3 – Are epistemes bad according to Foucault? What might make them so?

What are some examples of the way in which an episteme organises thought? Take the idea of medicine. Most people accept, without thinking, that what we call medicine is useful, valuable and good for you. Why? Because all kinds of institutions (hospitals, medical colleges, government bureaucracies, schools, the media) tell us that this is so. But we are also told what 'real' medicine is (say, antibiotics) compared with what it isn't (anti-oxidant vitamins, the blood of a chicken prepared by a witch, or holy water from Lourdes, for example). This 'order of things' is based on the relation between the idea of scientific principles, methods and reason, on the one hand, and a body of practices undertaken by doctors and nurses on the other. Things (people, ideas,

materials, approaches) are classified as either medicine—which is valuable and scientific—or as folk remedies or mumbo jumbo which isn't to be taken seriously or treated as if it were valuable. Think of the controversy that erupted in England because Glen Hoddle, the then-national football manager, was sending his players to see a faith healer. There would have been no such controversy if he had sent them to a physiotherapist.

Another example is the way in which life forms are classified. People who have been educated in conventional western thought usually think of life forms in terms of scientific classifications—insects, birds, fish, amphibians, reptiles, lawyers, mammals, that sort of thing. When we come across some life form, this system of classification automatically comes into play and (more or less unconsciously) determines our thinking—that is, determines how we see different creatures. This classificatory system is based on the idea that certain creatures share physical characteristics which constitute 'sameness' (mammals are warm-blooded and suckle their young), and which differentiate them from other creatures (reptiles, amphibians and lawyers are cold-blooded and lay eggs).

QUESTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

1 – This notion of the changing reference of the same term across time is important for Foucault. What else may change the reference of the same term?

2 – If it is the case that the same term can refer to different things or categories, what makes it mean one thing or another?

3 – Are any of these references ‘untrue’ or ‘incorrect’?

Of course there is also continuity and sameness across epistemes, but for Foucault the sameness is actually an illusion based on misinterpretations. Certeau gives the following comment and example:

On one level, we have a surface permanence which, despite shiftings of ground, keeps words, concepts, or symbolic themes the same. A simple example: the ‘madman’ is spoken of in the sixteenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but actually ‘it is not a question of the *same* malady’ in any two of them. The same thing applies to theological exegesis as it does to medicine. The same words do not designate the same things. Ideas, themes, classifications float from one mental universe to another, but at each passage they are affected by structures which reorganize them and endow them with a new meaning. The same mental objects ‘function’ differently . . . Thus the fear which in the sixteenth century exiled the madman in an effort to avoid diabolical contagion, in the eighteenth century adopts medical terminology and resurfaces in the form of precautions against the contaminated air of the hospitals. (1986: 179–80)

Certeau’s point is that the term ‘the madman’ has been carried forward from the Renaissance through the Classical age to modernity, but what we now understand by it (and how we treat ‘the condition’ which is, of course, tied up with ideas derived from contemporary psychology or psychiatry) no longer corresponds to the ‘madman’ of the Renaissance, whose behaviour would have been understood as an effect of the moon or having been possessed by the devil. Although

QUESTIONING KNOWLEDGE

1 – What is the organising principle of the current episteme according to Foucault?

2 – What are examples of behaviour that fall foul of this episteme, and what are some examples of this behaviour taken to extremes?

3 – In the example, how does the ‘truth of resemblance’ operate?

This combination of disciplines, commentary and authors constitutes a kind of machine which produces the so-called ‘truth of madness’ which edits out and condemns anything that doesn’t fit within the ‘discursive formation’ at either a local (discipline-based) or general (culture-based) level. If a practitioner were suddenly to decide that madness really was a kind of demonic possession, and to suggest that patients be subjected to exorcisms, as was considered perfectly reasonable four hundred years ago, that person would automatically disqualify themselves from any claims to be a legitimate member of the discipline, because the ‘order of reason’ they were working out of belonged to a previous time.

We can see, in this example of discursive formations, just how epistemes are the ‘same but different’. During the Renaissance, people might be designated ‘possessed’ if their hair was sticking up on either side of their heads in the shape of two little horns—just like the devil. Remember, that episteme, according to Foucault, was based on the logic of the ‘truth of resemblance’. There is a comic example of this other ‘order of things’ in the film *Monty Python and the Search for the Holy Grail*, when a group of villagers is trying to decide if a woman is a witch. A ‘knowledgeable’ person explains how they can work things out: ‘we burn witches, so they must be made of wood; wood floats in water; ducks also float in water; so, if the woman weighs the same as a duck, she must be a witch’. Strangely enough, it works—‘It’s a fair cop’, she says.

QUESTIONING KNOWLEDGE

1 – In what ways are individuals read within the institutions listed – schools, church, medicine?

2 – What role do these “institutions” play in the categorisation of individuals, and how are these categorisations communicated widely?

3 – What are the dangers of the process of seeking the reason behind a characteristic – serial murder, homosexuality, liking the colour blue?

In our time, you wouldn't be arrested or institutionalised for looking like the devil, or because you weighed the same as a duck, but you are analysed and read (within the family, at school and church, in hospitals) in terms of signs that point to your 'truth'. One of the organising principles of our age, for instance, is the notion of the 'unconscious', or the idea that beneath the surface of events and things can be found the 'real' truth. When serial killers or mass murderers are identified, for instance, they are scrutinised, analysed and scientified to death (particularly in the media) in search of

signs that should have alerted us to what they were really like (and which can be used to identify potential deviants). In both cases (being possessed by the devil, and being a mass murderer) the process looks the same (you read the signs to discover 'the truth'), but the logic that is behind the readings is very different—one is based on a divine order of resemblances, the other is based on various forms of science.

DISCOURSES

1 – What do we think drives this valorisation of the individual? How does it connect to the valorisation of ‘reason’?

2 – What is the ideal form of the current episteme?

3 – Why is irrationality seen as dangerous? What does it threaten?

4 – Do we dream in language?

This idea of the self-knowing, individual subject in control of his or her thoughts and actions permeates our culture to such an extent that we never really question it. Contemporary popular culture provides plenty of examples of how this idea is both reinforced and valued. Think of any contemporary film hero or heroine—Harrison Ford fighting terrorists in *Patriot Games* or *Clear and Present Danger*, Sigourney Weaver up against aliens and the company in the *Alien* films, or the whole *Star Trek* crew in their battles with the Borg: in all these examples the ‘good guys’ are individuals who think for themselves, reason things out, and make decisions. This supposedly distinguishes them from terrorists, aliens and cyborgs, all of whom are driven by something (fanatical political beliefs, instinct, programming) over which they have no control.

Foucault rejects this idea of the self-governing subject, pointing out that what comes between ourselves and our experience is the grounds upon which we can act, speak and make sense of things. For Foucault, one of the most significant forces shaping our experiences is language. Try coming up with a thought, or making sense of an experience, without using language to do so. We not only use language to explain our ideas and feelings to others, we use it to explain things to ourselves. Foucault is not so much interested in language systems as a whole, as in individual acts of language—or discourse. Discourses can be understood as language in action: they are the windows, if you like, which allow us to make sense of, and ‘see’ things. These discursive windows or explanations shape our understanding of ourselves, and our capacity to distinguish the valuable from the valueless, the true from the false, and the right from the wrong.

DISCOURSES

1 – What is the error in Hughes' reading of Foucault?

2 – Does Foucault argue that because power is an inescapable facet of knowledge, we should just give up struggling?

3 – What is Foucault's position then?

and historian Robert Hughes argues that Foucault's ideas suggest that 'we are not in control of our own history and never can be' (1993: 71). He contrasts significant political events, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing in 1989, with what he regards as the theoretical dead end produced through Foucault's thought:

In the late 1980s, while American academics were emptying their heads, theorising that truth, language and the thinking subject were dead, the longing for freedom and humanistic culture were demolishing the very pillars of European tyranny. Of course, if the Chinese students had read their Foucault they would have known that repression is inscribed in all language, their own included, and so they could have saved themselves the trouble of facing the tanks in Tiananmen Square. (1993: 72)

In this passage Hughes uses words such as 'truth', 'freedom', and 'tyranny' in an unqualified manner. He assumes that everybody will understand and agree on what these terms mean. In Hughes' writing, these terms are assumed to be fundamental values of a society whose meaning is fixed for everyone and for all time. Foucault, in contrast, writes about relations of power, domains of knowledge, games of truth, forms of subjectivity, techniques of the self and orders of discourse. In each of these cases, the first term is at least as important as the second because, as was discussed in the previous chapter, it is the particular relations, domains, games, forms, techniques and orders of a social context that shape the kind of power, knowledge, truth, subjectivity, self, and discourse that apply within that context.

DISCOURSES

1 – What is the difference between a statement and other forms of discourse?

2 – In the example given, what is operating as the statements of the discourse of law?

3 – Does this distinction operate for other discourses – e.g. politics? religion? sex?

The basic unit of discourse is the statement. For Foucault, discourses are made up of statements that set up relationships with other statements: they share a space and establish contexts; they may also disappear and be replaced by other statements. Statements are essentially rare because, while a discourse can potentially take in an indefinite number of statements, usually only a limited number actually constitutes any discourse, and these are referred to again and again.

The field of law, for example, has a limited set of statements which establish the conditions for the truth upon which it arbitrates and makes judgements. A good example of this is the situation of sexual harassment. In the 1980s Professor Anita Hill claimed that she had been sexually harassed, years earlier, by Judge Clarence Thomas, who was about to be appointed to the US Supreme Court. Many people criticised Hill for waiting so long to say anything: 'Why,' they asked, 'didn't she make a complaint when this thing happened?' The answer she gave was quite simple: sexual harassment didn't actually 'exist' (in a legal sense) at the time she was working

DISCOURSES

- 1 – Given the truth-speaking role of public institutions, what is required for them to have authority?
- 2 – How would private institutions ‘pronounce truth’?
- 3 – What is the difference between the truth-speaking function of private / public institutions – who are their audiences?
- 4 – What truths does the University speak?

Institutions can be found across the various fields into which society is divided: educational, legal, penal, business, governmental, family, sporting, recreational, religious, cultural. These institutions have been characterised as belonging to either the private sphere (of family and personal concerns) or the public sphere (of work, economics, government, education and so forth). The public sphere is generally more institutionalised and regulated than the private. For example, there seems to be a relatively fixed and rigid set of protocols and procedures for regulating communication practices in public sphere institutions such as the law and big business, while a private sphere concern such as love or friendship seems much less rigid. It would be quite acceptable to address a close friend or lover by some ‘pet’ name such as ‘honeybun’ or ‘brave beaver’; it would be courting disaster to address a judge or managing director in such terms.

For Foucault these differences between public and private institutions are tied up with the notions of truth and ‘truth effects’. Public institutions draw their authority from their capacity to speak the truth about some situation. Legal institutions deliver the truth in their deliberations on criminal cases; scientific institutions pronounce the truth about breakthroughs in knowledge; government institutions are supposed to make judgements about the true and best way to administer society.

DISCIPLINE AND INSTRUCTION

- 1 – What does Foucault mean by discipline / disciplining?
- 2 – What is the relation of discipline to things like ‘appropriateness’, ‘respectability’, ‘fashion’, or ‘madness’?
- 3 – The example given shows an example of a discipline towards upper class behaviour. What are some differing examples, based on class, of disciplining?

There is a wonderful example of how bodies have been ‘trained’ to act out social values in the television comedy *Frasier*. In one episode the very highly educated and culturally snobbish brothers Frasier and Nyles patronise an exclusive restaurant. They know the place well (they regularly dine there) and this is communicated in their easy, relaxed walk, the expectant expressions on their faces, the way they happily greet the manager—in fact everything about their body language tells us that they are comfortable and at home in this place. Somebody who wasn’t ‘at home’ in exclusive restaurants would send all sorts of different signals—say, about nervousness, anxiety and contempt. Things change in the show, however, when Frasier and Nyles notice a huge, over-the-top, gaudily coloured painting of a matador and a bull hanging on the restaurant wall. Suddenly their bodies spring into action reflecting this new set of circumstances—they turn their noses up (literally), make faces, look nervously around the room. Something is wrong, and their bodies reflect this, without them being aware of what they are doing. Such events or practices often go unnoticed, or aren’t consciously considered, but they play an important part in determining how we see and treat ourselves and others.

DISCIPLINE

- 1 – How does the first form of discipline exert control on our behaviour?
- 2 – How does the second form of discipline exert control on our behaviour?
- 3 – How does the institution of the University, through disciplining you as individuals, change your knowledge of yourself and society's knowledge of you?

We can think of discipline in two main ways which, on the face of it, seem rather different from each other. One is tied to punishment—for instance, the idea of disciplining a disobedient child. The second relates to a body of skills and knowledges: we can identify an academic discipline such as history or sociology, or we can speak of the variety of disciplines to be mastered if you want to become a rock guitarist, a ballet dancer or a professional footballer. So the first meaning understands discipline as a verb—an action we perform on other people or ourselves. The second meaning sees discipline as a noun—a set of qualities that we need to master in order to be recognised and valued within a particular field. The first meaning also views discipline as a negative force, tied up with punishment and coercive behaviour. The second values discipline as a positive force, something tied up with self-empowerment and achievement.

Foucault connects these two understandings of discipline through his concept of power-knowledge. He goes beyond the fairly conventional view that the development and acquisition of knowledge necessarily makes people more powerful, or is 'good for them'. Rather, knowledge is something that makes us its subjects, because we make sense of ourselves by referring back to various bodies of knowledge. For instance, to be a student at a school or university we must enter into different academic disciplines, and gain certificates and degrees that provide credentials which will help make us suitable for various jobs. But to be a student is also to make ourselves known to the school system, so that it can monitor our progress, pass judgements upon us, and mould our attitudes and behaviours in various ways. In these ways, discipline and knowledge 'make' us certain kinds of people.

DISCIPLINE

1 – How do we discipline ourselves?
What are some examples?

2 – What are some examples of
punishment for poor disciplining in our
contemporary society?

3 – What are some examples of
gratification for good disciplining in our
contemporary society?

4 – When might this system of
punishment / gratification no longer
work?

Foucault stresses that such discipline was not simply imposed from above. Rather, people submitted themselves to be able to operate effectively in the new social and economic conditions that were emerging in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The new demands of factory production meant that people had to acquire the skills necessary to operate machinery, to manipulate implements and to endure the long days in gruelling conditions. A comparison is how an aspiring guitarist will willingly give up time to long, arduous, often repetitive and physically demanding practice in order to master the discipline. Discipline worked through such a system of punishment and gratification. People could be punished, or they could punish themselves for various indiscretions, but, at the same time, through disciplinary work it was possible to gain rewards and move up the scale—becoming a more senior factory worker (or a better guitarist).

DISCIPLINE

- 1 – What is the Panopticon (Bentham) and why does Foucault engage with it?
- 2 – What role does Foucault understand 'the gaze' to have in the disciplining of individuals?
- 3 – At what levels does 'the gaze' operate in this way – self, private, social, institutions, government?
- 4 – What might be the reason given by Foucault for the positioning of the feminine as the subject of the gaze in our society?

The gaze, though, is not something that is simply directed against us by others—it also becomes a way of looking at our own behaviours. Part of our socialisation influences us to make ourselves the subject of our own gaze, and so we are constantly monitoring our bodies, actions and feelings. There is a gender dimension to this authority of the gaze. In modern western societies, women or girls have often been positioned as desirable objects of what is called the male gaze. In other words, a fundamental part of how females are valued within such societies, and how they value themselves, is associated with how they look. In modern western societies magazines, whether they are directed to male or female readerships, will generally have photographs of females on the cover. Heterosexual male readers are disposed to see these female models as objects of their desire, while heterosexual female readers are disposed to see them as role models who, if they work upon themselves enough, they might resemble and, accord-

ingly, become desirable to the male gaze. Indeed, adolescent girls' magazines are extensively devoted to areas such as beauty hints, slimming tips, how to look great in a bikini this summer, and also promote various aids and pieces of equipment that are designed to provide a desirable look or body image. Like discipline, the acquisition of a desirable look involves a gentle (and sometimes not so gentle) punishment

DISCIPLINE

1 – What might the exceptions to this be?

2 – What might have changed between when Foucault was writing and nowadays to query this relationship?

3 – Does anonymity mean freedom?

In modern societies, which are regulated through the authority of the gaze and associated disciplinary apparatuses, we become more individuated the further down the scale we are. So the child is monitored through school examinations, employees are monitored through progress reports, and the poor are monitored through numerous government surveys into their living conditions, moral habits and work history. An example of this descending individualism is how populist newspapers and television programmes devote coverage to suspected cases of welfare fraud among the poor, naming the perpetrators of such 'outrages' (through headlines such as 'Single mum Cindy rips off the system'), while ignoring the more costly fraudulent activities of very wealthy groups and people. Indeed, it can be argued that extremely wealthy and influential individuals have the power to avoid the scrutiny of the gaze and so protect their interests.

One effect of this descending individualism is that part of the pleasure of popular culture in contemporary western societies is associated with the desire to become part of an undifferentiated mass. There is pleasure in being part of a heaving mob on the dance floor or in the mosh pit at rock concerts, where bodies seem free of disciplinary coercions.

RELATIONS OF POWER

- 1 – Why can we not speak of truth being opposed to power, in Foucault's work?
- 2 – Give an example of 'biopower' in our contemporary society – what controls us?
- 3 – Can we rid ourselves of biopower, or just change the shape of it?

Foucault doesn't accept this proposition. On the contrary, he argues that knowledge and truth are produced out of power struggles (between different fields, disciplines and institutions) and they are used to authorise and legitimate the workings of power. For instance, a person could be categorised as a deviant simply because the human sciences have produced such a category (say, 'the homosexual') and its characteristics and consequences ('they can't control themselves, and shouldn't teach in schools or serve in the armed forces'). Against this idea of power as being opposed to and by truth and knowledge, Foucault develops something very different—the notion of 'biopower', which can be understood as technologies that were developed at the same time as, and out of, the human sciences, and which were used for analysing, controlling, regulating and defining the human body and its behaviour.

POWER

- 1 – Why is freedom problematic for us as individuals? For society?
- 2 – Why is democracy an ‘empty space’ while kingship is not?
- 3 – In what ways is power concealed in our contemporary society?
- 4 – Kafka’s ‘The Castle’ PDF

These two developments—state policing and control of populations, and the part played by the human sciences in producing technologies of regulation, on the one hand, and ideas of progress and reform, on the other—are in a sense quite different, and even antithetical, to one another. After all, while the Enlightenment ideals wanted to free people from domination and control, the knowledge and technologies associated with what Foucault calls ‘biopower’ wanted to do the exact opposite—to control, regulate and dominate people, to make them ‘docile bodies’. The question Foucault asks is, how did the ideals, theories and discourses of freedom, revolution and Enlightenment come to be ‘taken over’ by the procedures and practices of biopower?

Certeau looks for the answer in the Freudian narrative of the unconscious and the return of the repressed. Why do disciplinary techniques ‘win out’ in the end? The techniques of observation, regulation and control that culminated in what, for Foucault, is our contemporary system of power, successfully vampirised the Enlightenment project because there was something in the conditions of the time and place which encouraged their growth. If the Enlightenment got rid of the divine king and set up, in his place, the ‘empty space’ of democracy, then the question remains as to how the state was to function (for instance, how was a population to be organised, educated and controlled?) without direction, and without being kept under careful scrutiny? In a sense, the Enlightenment project of evacuating the place of power (because power no longer belonged to, nor could it be associated with, anyone) can also be understood as an invitation to power to conceal itself.

POWER

- 1 – What was the function of the kingship for Foucault?
- 2 – What does it mean to say power is ‘diffused’?
- 3 – What is the problem with the statements given as examples of hidden power?

In a sense the king could always know everything because he (or she) was the one who determined (as God’s representative on earth) what the truth was. But these days there is so much information floating about (on radio, television, the internet) that it becomes difficult to know what to believe—was Princess Diana killed by the British Secret Service? By Mossad? By the Devotees of the Great White Ram? We’ll never know. So much ‘information’ has been created about the event that it will be impossible to get to ‘the truth’. And, just as information and knowledge are diffused and multiplied across a culture, so is power, in the form of different systems of government and regulation. If the man in *The Castle* had been able to find a single person who was in charge he might have had a chance, but ‘the system’ was in charge, and if the system had identified him, then he had to be guilty.

This is one of the most important of Foucault’s insights with regard to power—that it is more effective when it is hidden from view. In other words, although knowledge and technologies are being used to control and regulate individuals and populations, the official version of things is that they are ‘working in our interests’, ‘taking care of us’, looking after us and watching over us ‘for our own good’ (‘the system is working for you’).

POWER

- 1 – What effect does this location of power as fluid and unowned do to conceptions of truth and / or knowledge?
- 2 – Is power a good or bad thing?
- 3 – What does this mean for our ability to shape our society?
- 4 – What would an ideal society look like for Foucault?

His first major point is that power isn't a thing that is either held by, or belongs to, anybody. In the time of absolute monarchs the king or queen was able to exercise power because it belonged to them—they had received the 'gift' of power from God. But, in the Classical and Modern ages, the place of power is evacuated—power belongs to no-one.

As far as Foucault is concerned, power now functions in terms of the relations between different fields, institutions, bureaucracies, and other groups (such as the private media and other businesses) within the state. What characterises these relations of power is that they are not set in stone. Power can flow very quickly from one point or area to another, depending on changing alliances and circumstances. In other words, power is mobile and contingent.

POWER

1 – Why do ‘the people’ not really exist? What defines ‘the people’? Who are ‘the people’?

2 – In what way does Foucault propose that we do not have independent minds?

3 – Is this escapable?

4 – What should we do?!

There is an idea that, in the modern age, power comes from the people. This is based on the idea that, at least in democracies, the people elect their leaders. However, if we look at history in the twentieth century we will find that it is not a case of the people holding power, or even delegating power to individuals or groups, but a case of groups becoming powerful by ‘standing in’ for the people, or by claiming to speak for or represent the people. In a sense ‘the people’ don’t really exist—politicians and other groups are continually inventing ‘the people’ to support and authorise their causes

The other reason that power isn’t held by and doesn’t belong to the people is that, for Foucault, not only are the people, as an organic group, ‘invented’ by politicians and others, but people are themselves produced by, and subject to, the forces of biopower. The way people come to understand the world, the way they behave, the values and aspirations they develop and the way in which they react to events: all these things are fashioned out of the various apparatuses and technologies of biopower. So it’s not as if people have independent minds and free will which might allow them to choose who will represent them, or what political system will best look after their interests, or even what their best interests are. Those kinds of things—what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls ‘habitus’ and ‘dispositions’—are already ‘the ‘effects’ of power or, to be more specific, the effects of biopower.

FOUCAULT AND GENDER



FOUCAULT AND GENDER

Foucault's work goes about showing us that the way we think about matters like Gender or Sexuality are not “essential” or “fixed” – there is no epistemological inevitability for our current conceptions of what gender is or what sexuality is.

The things we think about gender / sex discourse are attached in constructed categories to other fields of knowledge – religion, politics, science etc.



MICHEL
FOUCAULT,
“HISTORY OF
SEXUALITY VOL
1” 105

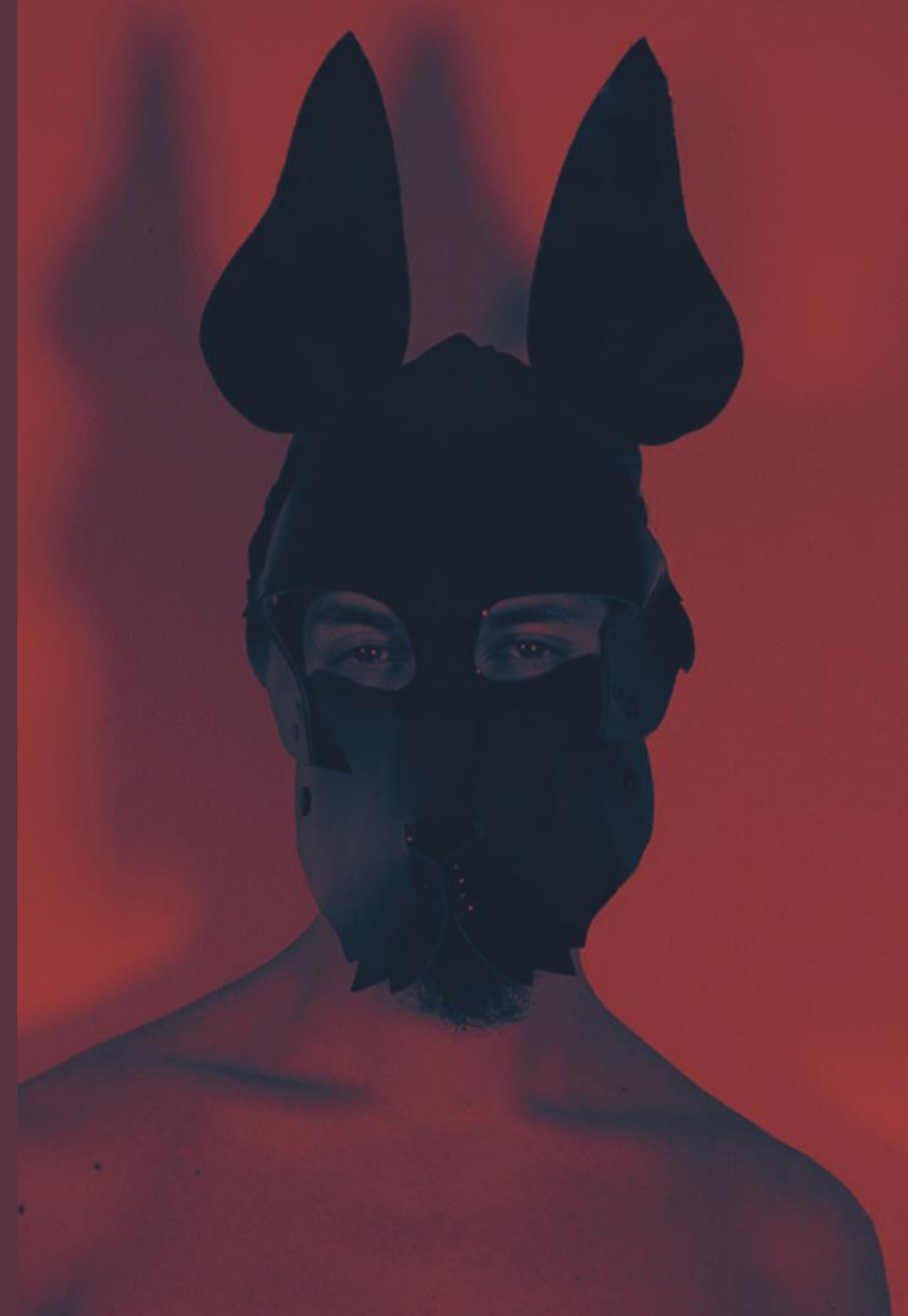
“Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct...”

FOUCAULT AND GENDER

Critically, this means that all our beliefs are constructed by our location in society.

This is not just subjectivity, per post-modern theory, but also an awareness of structural construction in society.

This idea of a constructed identity, that identity is formed by our place in society, is at the heart of modern gender / queer theory.



FOUCAULT AND GENDER

Identity is not fixed; instead, it is fluid, unstable, and context-specific. Identity also changes and is unmoored from any physical reality.

While feminism may have argued that social roles are unmoored from the physical reality of sex (female pilots!), this largely operated within the sexual binary, reforming the gendered roles in society, rather than seeking to disrupt the binary itself – the system of power that formed knowledge around sex such that it become a (false) binary choice between male/female and masculine/feminine.

For Foucault, Power is not an “all-or-nothing” proposition.

Foucault's critique of forms of feminism (and other universalist ideologies – Marxism etc) is that they imply those in power hold *all* the power.

Furthermore, clear definitions of identity (e.g., bourgeoisie vs. proletariat, men vs. women) unrealistically portray both the reality of identity and the power dynamic.

FOUCAULT AND GENDER

Instead, Foucault believed that power can be used and deployed by particular people in specific situations, which itself will produce other reactions and resistances; power is not tied to specific groups or identities.

Power is context-specific, as are identities.

We all function within complicated and changing systems of power relations that are never fixed, static, or inevitable.

WHERE
THERE IS
POWER
THERE IS
RESISTANCE

MICHAEL FOUCAULT

ROUND UP

Truth is produced by power through the categorisation of knowledge.

Knowledge is formed by the power to categorise new experiences according to existing categories

Power operates obviously, through systems of control like institutions, and diffusely, through social norms and expectations.

Foucault's insight means that our “truths” become detached from any innate nature.

We do not HAVE to have categories of sane and insane, nor do those categories have to be formed the way they are.

We choose to have them

We could choose not to have them...

READING

Today, we have completed our discussion of Michel Foucault and his work. We turn in the next sections to aspects of feminist theory and the work of Judith Butler.

Your reading for this session are the chapters 'Gender' and 'Subjectivity, Identity, and Desire' from the book "Understanding Judith Butler"

A permalink to this book is included on the Moodle page.

