

## SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

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### **Foucault and the Turn to Bodies**

Jan Gabriel S. Boller

#### **Abstract**

The question about bodies is one that eludes a single answer. There is no catch-all definition of what a body is. If we do, however, we deny all the other possibilities that it can do – which we do not even know in the first place. Now, it is an interesting take on poststructuralism to regard such topic. The question about bodies has been set aside for so long, and it was Michel Foucault, the so-called “historian of the present” who put this question as the primary focus of his analysis. He sought to understand power, its logic, its manifestations, and how it seeps through every crack in our society, even how it functions in our own bodies. As this paper primarily explores sexual hierarchies, I believe that a preliminary discussion should be done first to give justice and argue Foucault’s positions well with regards to the matter. Topics include the ontology of power, docile bodies, and Foucault’s emphasis on the care for the self.

**Keywords:** Body, Foucault, Power, Repressive Hypothesis, Scientia Sexualis, Self-Mastery

## **The Turn to Bodies**

The twentieth century saw the world at large in the heaps of human civilization's failed attempts in grasping the world and the events that happen therein as history unfolds. Events such as the erection of the Berlin Wall, the assassination of world leaders here and there, the Vietnam War, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the Cold war, to name a few, mark that there is something wrong in the world that needs to be addressed. It was also the time that philosophy as an academic study was waning. It is on one hand due to the discipline of sociology gaining traction in the universities, and on the other was because existentialism is failing to provide answers to the different crises the world faces. It is in this vein that the question of the subject as how existentialism situates it should be reframed. The seemingly unattached, transcendental, and otherworldly reflections of philosophy of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were therefore questioned by thinkers. Thus, structuralism became apparent as an alternative to the traditional philosophy by turning its focus to psychoanalysis, history, and social sciences, or even leaving philosophy altogether as the sole rigorous method of understanding and resolving different problems in human affairs. In taking this leap from the traditional philosophical landscape, the "death of the subject" has been recognized (Schrift 5). This made a way to the understanding that reality is malleable, and the primary objects that we have to analyze are the structures and relations of things, thereby effectively decentralizing the subject. This downplaying of the role of the subject in human affairs seems to be a kind of reactionary thinking in a subject-oriented world. Many of us would find this configuration rather disorienting since it detaches our alignment with the world as human beings. However, this extremity was back-pedalled by poststructuralist intellectuals. As Jacques Derrida, a prominent figure in poststructuralism along with Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, points out that "one cannot get along without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions" (Derrida 271). Without dismantling the ideas of

structuralism, the subject is thus reinstated. Drawing heavily on the philosophies of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, analysis of language, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, sexual differences, relations of power, discourse, and the construction of the subject was rigorously taken up with much enthusiasm. As we focus on the four latter topics mentioned above, one poststructuralist philosopher by the name of Michel Foucault offers an in-depth historical, critical, and philosophical analysis. It was during his time that the philosophical scene was turning to bodies as their focal point, and at the same time their line of flight. Foucault sees, unlike Kant, that bodies and consciousness do not function solely by means of ahistorical *a priori* categories as a transcendental subject. Rather he finds that the subject always deeply associates itself with history. Essential here is a subject's experience which is bound and deeply emerged in its historical situatedness even before the subject becomes conscious of it. This is what Foucault terms "historical *a priori*." In Foucault's discussion about Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, he compares the difference between the sixteenth century and the nineteenth and twentieth century in terms of interpretations. Not only did the latter give way to a much wider discipline of interpretations, but it also made way for us to know that there is language elsewhere in language, and Foucault pointed out that these three thinkers intensified this kind of interpretation by implying that in such a task, we come to know that we also include ourselves in interpretation: for Nietzsche, linguistically; for Freud, psychoanalytically; for Marx, they can be found among the relations of material conditions. It was during this time that interpretations have become primarily about signs and those who interpret themselves, rather than the objects they sought to analyze. But of course, this is not without reason. What Foucault implies here is that interpretation has become an endless task; like Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, who resist absolute interpretation of things, Foucault gathers that whenever a thing is close to attaining an absolute status of definition through interpretation, it turns toward itself, a *point de rupture*. Could this be the very reason why the body evades interpretation? That we cannot

directly discourse about the body without reaching the point where it becomes oppressive, but rather we must first do a detour to understanding the relations of powers that govern them? This perhaps is what Foucault sees as the historical *a priori*. That a subject, prior to it becoming aware of the different facets and characteristics of its consciousness, is initially faced with the vast sets of signs interpreted by those who came before it – and underlying in these interpretations of the body, comes about the power that directs them.

### **Power and Anatomy**

Foucault understands that our modern society has become more efficient in utilizing power. By power, he does not mean something as an authoritarian capacity to oppress, such as what we can see explicitly in the sovereign. What he means is a relational exchange of recognition. With his idea of power, it implies that everyone participating in a society is always involved in some sort of power play. So much so that in his diagnosis of the disappearance of the sovereignty in terms of controlling power absolutely, it made way for a new kind of establishing and maintaining power, that it does not necessarily need an authoritarian state to conduct such sustenance. This new manifestation of power, which regulates itself, is discipline.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces, by means of describing the gruesome techniques of punishment when public executions were still apparent, how, through the body, the power of the sovereign can exact vengeance and instil fear in hopes of restoring order. The order that the punished has disrupted, and the sovereign that the condemned has disgraced. For when an individual conducts such actions that interrupt the social order, apart from the direct recipient of the act, it is the society itself that he harms, and likewise, that he gets reprimanded for. Thus, public executions serve as an enjoyment, an intrigue for the crowd, and at the same time a warning for those who would attempt to do the same. It is through this double aspect of the effects of public executions why Foucault sees that the sovereign resorted to this means of

punishing. To punish without the public knowing about it is an opportunity wasted. For it does not effectively bridge the reason why there should be punishments at all and the process of punishment itself. Thus, for Foucault, the entire old justice system works in a poetic sense, since the exact crime would be reciprocated in an equal manner. However, the world saw a turn in the use of power in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the sovereign was shifting to a more subtle use of power, but at the same time, more effective. In the advancements of the learning of the body, we have also learned that it can be a passageway for power. That the body, capable of being docile, may be subjected, used, and improved. Through discipline, power was able to be redirected and channelled in a more effective sense and establish a dimension of normalization of the habitual regularity of the subject imposed by the institution it was participating in. Now that the body has become the means to exercise power, the visible force the sovereign holds was vanishing into various forces dispersed in institutions within a disciplinary society: schools, hospitals, prisons, military camps, and the like. This makes way for the individuals within these institutions to be developed and moulded in such a manner that can be utilized and aligned for the narrative and purposes of such.

The most notable characteristic of the disciplinary society of the eighteenth century, Foucault notes, is how it could be a general formula for domination through molecular disciplinary techniques. With the subtlety of discipline in rendering a body docile and a collective uniform, there becomes a new economy that regulates the transactional nature of different behavioural languages, gestures, and movements within the internal organization where it belongs. Thus, Foucault highlights the three qualities of attaining disciplinary control. Through scale (by treating the body in infinitesimal units rather than a whole cohesive unity), object (by creating an economy present through the exercise of different transactions within the internal organization), and modality (the emphasis on the process of exercise rather than its product). By guaranteeing the uniformity of the language within the present economy, it also

ensures its outcome, making it more efficient and secure) to control. However, looking at discipline merely in this way, it would be easy to conceptualize it only as a different form of oppressive power. As we get to know more about the body, we also explore it in a manner that we break it down and rearrange its composition to reconfigure it from its usual utility. Such is the nature of the discipline. It rearranges the body molecularly, while not subjugating it to a kind of master-slave relations found among the previous domination regimes. It still gives autonomy to the body externally, while modifying and coding it internally for whichever utility the disciplinarian redirects it into.

### **The Repressive Hypothesis and *Scientia Sexualis***

Foucault talks about how modern society tries to frame how our bodies' movements, acts, and eventually, our desires are essentially linked with our sexuality. Additionally, in recent history, we witnessed exponential discursive growth about sex in the sense that we are becoming oversaturated with a lot of accounts, theories, and definitions about it to the point that we can no longer keep up on them. It is in this vein that I would like to raise two points relevant to Foucault's analysis on the discourse of sexuality: first, that we, as subjects having historical a priori, have been situated in a world where talks about such were suppressed for so long that whenever we try to crack the mystery about it, we can never do it without feeling some kind of anomaly. This is where Foucault's "regressive hypothesis" comes into play; and for the second, that the disciplinary society which allowed the discursive explosion on sexuality rests on such a fragile ground where the inquiry on the very same object it tries to articulate can become too oppressive, this is where the *scientia sexualis* as a method on analysis for sexuality becomes relevant.

Foucault outlines in the first of his four-volume *History of Sexuality* about the formulation of his repressive hypothesis where we are not indifferent whenever we talk about

sexuality openly. Meaning, we all experience the same repressive tendency. Since, if we are to effectively discourse about a certain thing, “we must first subjugate our thoughts at the level of language,” so that there is a common medium (Foucault 17). This is where Foucault analyzes the said discourse in the level of historical a priori. By this he sought “to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory become possible,” and at the same time to search for new practices of analysis in the wake of the epistemic breakdown of representation in the early modern period. In doing so, he tries to subtly uncover the point of irregularities that have been normalized in terms of the discourse in sexuality, or more properly, why there is such a great effort to dispel and ignore such. We must, however, note that this level of analysis does not offer a corrective or disruptive solution to the existing narrative. Rather, it just exposes the conditions that made them possible in the first place. For him, what made the discourse on sexuality elusive is because the structure of modern society had censored it either directly or indirectly. Take the secondary schools in the eighteenth century for example. Foucault writes,

... the space for classes, the shape of the tables, the planning of the recreation lessons, the distribution of the dormitories (with or without partitions, with or without curtains), the rules for monitoring bedtime and sleep periods—all this referred, in the most prolix manner, to the sexuality of children. (Foucault 28)

On this account, we can observe that the architectural patterns of different institutions have been affected by the overarching narrative. They do not ignore the discourse on sexuality altogether, but rather address it not in terms of language, but towards disciplinarity that is combined with the architectural planning to imply that the talk about sexuality is something that should be repressed without directly engaging their subjects about it in a discursive language, because by doing so, it defeats itself. This internal discourse of institutions was manifest and can be observed today even in a more liberal and open setting. So, with the gradual liberation of discourses on sexuality unfolding on our horizon, we cannot simply do away with

the question of “why do we say that we are repressed?” It is evident that it is still lurking. This could not be answered solely by asking the question and analyzing what enabled and made way for the historical repression of sexuality.

Foucault also devotes a section in the *History of Sexuality* on *scientia sexualis* – or the scientific rationalization of sexuality. He announces that we have witnessed in the past two centuries a multiplication of discourse on sex, which continues even up until now. So the crisis of the past about sexuality is being slowly uncovered. What is peculiar with all the discourses about sex is that even if there has been a thorough analysis of it, it remains a “secret,” a stash of an infinite treasure trove of power to be exploited by institutions. However, to get rid of this repression, it is not enough to discourse about it, Foucault contends. He doubts that the current discourses held on sex take up a new form that enables or perpetuates an asymmetrical, like that of the sovereign, but a more subtle, power. We also must liberate sexuality from the grasp of the disciplinary society greatly characterized by bourgeois ideology and their subjugation of bodies into mere cogs of the mechanical and machinic nature of capitalism. The capitalist-liberal agenda of repressing sexuality further, though not by the means of censoring it, roots in the reason that they see sex as a distinct unproductive pleasure. Because sex impacts the population directly, the state decided that it must be analyzed to subjugate its constituents further on a more effective and greater scale. The talk about sex as something that is “improper” on social conventions, led people to take on the task of liberating their own sexuality individually. This has two implications: first, the individual finds himself unbound by the society’s dictates on one’s personal identity, thus breaking the barriers of stereotype. But on this very notion, the second implication comes into play, that the said individual will become labelled as deviant, or someone with an unconventional way of living as opposed to those who are successfully conditioned by the bourgeois ideology that rests on *scientia sexualis*, to easily categorize and identify its subordinates.



### **Towards Self-Mastery**

The endeavour of the disciplinary society roots in the idea that the body is an object of knowledge and an outlet of power at the same time. So rather than disposing of it after it commits an act outside the societal norms, the society knew that it is better to conduct studies on it. Here we see the link that Foucault subtly connects with each other about bodies, power, and sexuality. The relations of the discourses about our bodies through sexuality enable us to see in a vivid manner how power relations work. Important here is the individual's sense of understanding that irregularities are by no means necessarily harmful to oneself and society. Since it is in the nature of power to be repressive, one must know that it is in the points of incongruity where we can break this asymmetrical power the society imposes upon an individual and arrest it on an equal relation. If further possible, this undertaking could also turn the tables around to evaluate and establish what would be the best resolution in maintaining and regulating equal power-relations. In their works, we can trace the contours the three masters of suspicion had individually raised themselves. In line with Marx, Foucault outlines how the discipline has become the subjugating method of the bourgeois society and sees sex as an unproductive product of desire; with Freud, he relates how power-relation dominates an individual as the superego imposes upon it a different set of rules, recognized consciously or unconsciously by it; with Nietzsche, through discourse, linguistic or beyond, we were able to identify how the rationalization of sexuality has been avoided or censored altogether throughout history. Additionally, I would like to point out that Foucault emphasizes that this liberation of oneself from the shackles of asymmetrical repressive power of the state and disciplinary institutions means that we should practice our freedom by caring for ourselves. However, one should not mistake this care for the self for hedonistic tendencies. Foucault stresses that the care for the self involves ethical reflection, so it essentially entails that care for

others also comes about. It is in caring for oneself that one also knows oneself. Further, when one knows oneself, one knows how to regulate and control power with ethical considerations toward others, thus making for conversion of power-relations of the dominated and subjugated. Perhaps, if practised on a grander scale, such as institutional and the level of the state, would yield a more tolerable society as a result. Foucault's analysis of power and how he sees it being normalized, stored, and deployed is one of the primary ailments of the modern world.

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## About the Author

Jan Gabriel S. Boller is an adjunct instructor from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. He is currently taking up postgraduate studies at Christ the King Mission Seminary.