

Foucault's Work for the Analysis of Gender Relations: Theoretical Reviews

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Abstract

Michel Foucault's focus on power relationships has drawn political scientists, political philosophers, and feminists to his texts. His argument which analyses power and discourse takes political analysts beyond state as the locus of power. In general, his work is important for feminist analyses, especially the three-volume of historical account of sexuality, because it shares with feminists and intense and critical gaze at sexuality, 'power and knowledge.' However, Foucault's politics of Western sexuality leaves female sexuality invisible. To complete this historical account of sexuality requires feminist critiques which extend and alter the analysis to include female sexuality. Thus, the question is not if, but how Foucault should be situated into contemporary feminist theory. This paper examines four major criticisms that traditional feminists have argued against Foucault's understanding of theory-justification, power relations, collective politics, and gender neutrality. We argue that the first three criticisms are undiscovered, but offer an important set of political tool to feminism. For the gender neutrality criticism, we argue that Foucault's neglect of gender difference in his history of sexuality falls short of feminist goals. Finally, feminists should approbate only the aspects of Foucauldian philosophy that are conducive to gender analysis and move beyond Foucault's androcentrism to create alternative histories of sexuality and opportunities for resistance.

Keywords

Foucault

Feminism

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To date, feminists are torn between on the one hand, disliking Foucault for neglecting to include women within the frames of his theories and on the other hand, recognizing his value as a rhetorician and the potential of his theories in conjunction with feminist studies. Although some feminist scholars, such as Deveaux, contend that Foucault is inappropriate for use in their scholarship, others, such as Butler and Bell oppose this view. Others see this inadequacy as something that can be bandaged with a complementary feminist theory. However, we can call the three-major Foucauldian theme, knowledge, power, and subjectivity to analysts of feminism [1].

The first criticism is Foucault's notion of Enlightenment rationality and humanism. Some feminists argued that Foucault is unable to provide a viable alternative or a normative basis for resisting oppression because Foucault denies the use of universal values. Thus, Foucault cannot justify the necessity why status quo conditions are unbearable. Fraser explains that Foucault's agonistic notion of power posits that power is productive, ineliminable, and normative neutral. In contrast, Fraser asserts that feminist needs to be able to distinguish between social practices that are good and bad. In other words, by abandoning the foundationalist grounding of humanist values, what sort of nonfoundationalist justification can such values lay claim. Foucault has never provided reasons and insinuated that value can never require justification [2], [3]. This allegation reflects that Foucault is a relativist because he is anti-humanist refusing to engage in normative discussions. He is so guilty of overlooking the political aspects of power and resistance.

However, it is too negative to completely overlook Foucault's notion of Enlightenment to analysts of feminism. It does not mean that one has to be for or against the enlightenment. We can either accept the enlightenment and remain within the traditional or rationalism, or else we can criticize the enlightenment and try to escape from its principle of rationality. In fact, Foucault's critique of Enlightenment rationality and humanism is an enterprise for linking the process of truth and the history of liberty and formulating a philosophical question that to be considered. Foucault refuses the blackmail of enlightenment by not introducing dialectic nuance while seeking to determine what good and bad element there maybe in the enlightenment. Then, Foucault insists that we must try to proceed with the analysis of ourselves with historical determination [4]. Thus, Foucault's 'notion of critique' is extremely useful because, in critique, he doesn't mean just what we are and how we see ourselves but also what else we might be and how we could be different from ourselves. Then, individual might be able to move beyond their own historical contexts [5]. Hence, Foucault does not want to overthrow social order, rather rejects the use of universal criteria for moral and political judgment. Foucault wants to examine what reason is, what its effects are, and why we use it. Moreover, Foucault's refusal of the blackmail of the enlightenment provides feminist a model for questioning binaries of rational/irrational, strong/weak, and mind/body. Foucault and feminists have a shared interest in transcending the binary logics, otherwise humanism itself inaccessible to critiques because it will be under controlled and imposed. Hence, we should examine the types of Foucauldian questions as a critical attitude of problematization. Consequently, it is important to

target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network [7].” (emphasis added)

feminists that they have identified in patriarchal society; they are able to condemn such practices without being limited to an internal critique.

The second criticism that feminists utilize against Foucault concerns his theory of power relations. In response to Foucault's claim that subjects cannot exist outside power, some feminists consider it as detriment to emancipatory projects; without individual agency it is impossible to resist domination. Linda Alcoff (1988) argues that it is difficult to understand how agency can be formulated on this view given by Foucault. According to power/knowledge or the dominant discourse, there could be agency only if human beings were given the causal ability to create, affect, and transform power/knowledge or discourses, but Foucault does not concede to us this capacity. Thus, if Foucault's analysis of subjectivity is correct, a feminist emancipatory project is in trouble [6]. A brief review is necessary.

In fact, Foucault argues that power functions in every human relationship to influence individuals to behave a certain way. Foucault explains that

“Power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective. If in fact they are intelligible, this is not because they are the effect of another instance that ‘explain’ them, but rather because they are imbued, through and through, with calculation: there is no power exercise without a series of aims and objective. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject...Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power...Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversely,

Thus, for Foucault, power has a dual nature; it both limits and creates possibilities for individuals. Strategies of power gravitate toward the solidification and strengthening of themselves. The danger is that strategies could freeze and become a state of domination as oppose to power relations, and close off the possibility of resistance. While, power relations contain the possibility of ‘their own disturbance.’ Power is contrary to domination. Consequently, power must allow the exercise of freedom that is contingent over free subjects. If there were no possibilities of resistance, there would be no power relations at all [8], [9]. Moreover, Foucault argues that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere. He does not believe in a system of domination exerted by one group over another. One can rise serious doubts concerning the ‘repressive hypothesis’ for one to choose to understand and appear a new episode either lessening of prohibition or a more devious and discrete form of power [10]. Speaking of power and body, Foucault suggests a modern notion of sexuality which can be useful to feminism. In the seventeenth century, ‘power over life’ evolves two basic forms that link together by a whole cluster of power relations. First, body as a machine, its disciplining was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the ‘disciplines, an anatoma-politics of the human body.’ Second, body as the basis of the biological processes, body imbued with the mechanics of life such as propagation, births, and morality. This supervision

was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls or 'a bio-politics of the population.' The discipline of the body constitutes the organization of power over life. This emergence of so-called 'bio-power' that Foucault's characteristic term for modern social forms, sexuality becomes a key element and this was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism after the nineteenth century. Therefore, the history of sexuality becomes a history of our discourses about sexuality and the deployment of sexuality discourse is one part of a complex growth of control over individuals through the apparatus of sexuality [11-13].

According to such notion of sexuality and power, Foucault would be critical of Alcoff's emphasis on emancipation or liberation. Power is not unitary, but omnipresent; it is intangible but a forceful reality of social existences and all social relations. *The History of sexuality* does offer an alternative view of seeing the relationship between sexuality and wider social forces to the traditional functionalism that many leave interpretation. Moreover, it directs us to investigate the role of particular apparatus such as social welfare, legal institution in shaping sexuality. In other words, the organization of sexuality produces point of oppression, of challenge, of contestation. In this recognition, the constant struggle within the definition of sexuality is extremely important point in Foucault's work. Thus, it is here that the concept of 'liberation' is rejected. Liberation is not the release of a hidden essence that should be the target of sexual radicalism, but conscious intervention at the level of the definition of appropriate sexual behavior [14]. Hence, the criticism of Foucault is based on the assumption that political strategies must be defined and reasoned out before acting. Political practice is not developed at the level of normative judgment, rather in agendas and programmes. In

fact, Foucault aims to encourage creativity and such reversal is significant for oppressed individuals because one's action can be a function of unequal power relations that can insist binary opposition. Freedom refers to the individual's ability to transgress limits and to alter how one fits within a particular set of power relations or to reverse the power relation themselves. It is, in fact, an invention of alternative to a current practice. Thus, it can be argued that Foucault's notion of power has a theory of agency implicit within it.

Moreover, Foucault's account of power appears particularly useful for feminist theory in several ways. Especially in a second wave feminist literature, it has taken up Foucault's work on power, his *Power/Knowledge* and *The History of Sexuality* vol.1, in a different way. It stresses the possibilities of resistance over the fact of domination and assertion that individuals contest fixed identities and relations in subtle ways. Thus, it is particular helpful for feminists who want to show the diverse sources for women's subordination [15]. Bodo argues that Foucault's description of power's effects on the body in *Discipline and Punish* has extremely valued for the 'technique of self' that women adopt to become feminine [16]. Furthermore, women have been subjugated by internalized power relations through the development of norms and competencies, not simply by taking power away [17]. As Foucault explains that there is no centralized oppressor, but rather the habits and comportment of masculinity and femininity that women perpetuate themselves through dieting, exercise, fashion, beauty techniques, which implicate the lived experiences of women's bodies. Women are socialized to be for others, for men. Concurrently, it is difficult for women to rid themselves of these practices as they come to view themselves in terms of how they are perceived by others. Here, a women's worth is often dependent

on the male gaze [18]. Thus, Foucault's understanding of power recognizes its diverse effects and women's role in their own oppression resulting in an understanding that moves beyond victimization. If feminist clings to an emancipatory project for female victims of power, it will preserve the old dichotomies of power in spite of itself [19]. In other words, traditional feminist theory cannot explain the pleasure that women may derive from performing these practices because it posits a singular view of femininity as oppressive.

The third criticism is the claim that Foucault's refusal of identity politics destroys the basis for collective political action. Supporters to this argument asserts that political alliances are based on a shared feminine identity and are concerned that any threat to the stability of this identity is detrimental to the ability of women to mobilize support. Hartsock argues that one of Foucault's greatest weakness is the inability to support any movement that through its massiveness and disciplined unity would be popular and yet powerful enough to undermine an entrenched legal-political arena. Thus, it undermines attempts by women to gain control of their life. She affirms that there is a stable center occupied by patriarchal institutions, in opposition to which marginal groups can be constituted, and consequently that the movement of power is one way travelling from center to against the periphery [20].

For Foucault, it would be important to problematize this use of women's sexual identities. Such identities are given by traditional feminist assumption that there is a universal and ahistorical notion of woman [21]. A brief in the second criticism also shows that in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault conducts a genealogy of sexuality and purpose that sex is an arbitrary and contingent component of identity. In the eighteenth century,

due to the threat of the epidemic disease decreased, government began to focus on life control rather than death. Populations emerged as political and economic problems which were needed to be policed. Consequently, for the first time, it became necessary to be aware of each individual's sex and sexual activities. This is seen as a will that developed in the realm of sex resulting in the creation, classification, and recording of natural and unnatural masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, and other sexualities. Moreover, sex became something hidden that individuals were compelled to confessed; not only did sex unify biological and physical characteristics, but also implicated the essential and psychological core of the individual. Then, an individual became his or her sex. Thus, sex had to be spoken of; sex was driven out of hiding and constrained to lead a discursive existence. This is because sex was constructed with a set of discriminatory power relations. There is an implicit racism embedded in the concept that would become anchorage points for the different varieties of racism of the nineteenth and twentieth century [22-26].

In fact, Foucault's response is possible to support a feminist identity. Foucault's historicized identity does not deny the reality of sexual identity, but demonstrates its limitations and dangers. To displace sex as the foundation of identity, he rejects the essentialist assumption that identity is a basis for a community. However, a characteristic to unify women is constructed through the act itself [27], [28]. Moreover, contemporary feminism has been excluded the used of single category of woman but encountered with counter-movements including women of color, and Third World feminists. Thus, many feminists have drawn on Foucault's notion of sexual identity.

Both Judith Butler and Jana Sawicki have criticized the essentialist argument that Hartsock's view implies. They argue that Foucault's microhistorical investigations and his genealogies of power relations have much to offer feminism, especially in his location of body as the primary site of control. Furthermore, they see the loose of totalizing gender categories as the ground for positive areas of resistance among divergent groups and individuals [29], [30]. Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, argues that the subject of women can no longer view as a stable and distinct entity. She is equally interested in the construction of gender and sexual minorities. Her most controversial move is to use Foucault's work on modern power to deconstruct the very notion of women. Butler purposes that we view gender as discursively and materially constructed through repetitive performance of words, acts, gestures and desire. We reconceptualize identity as 'an effect' in order to destabilize gender and open up new, unforeseen possibilities for agency. Thus, to move beyond identity politics is to recognize that identities are power constructed. This, in turn, increases opportunities for resistance because it allows individuals to locate strategies of subversive repetition and to affirm the local possibilities of intervention within the repetition of constituting identity practices. For example, socialist feminist have drawn extensively on the argument that rather than having a fixed core, subjectivity is constructed through language and is, therefore, an open-ended, contradictory, and culturally specific amalgam of different subject position. Socialist feminist uses it to criticize radical feminist tendency to construct women as a global sisterhood linked by invariant, universal feminine characteristics [31-33]. Thus, the sexual identities in Butler's view, like Foucault, are constituted by regular practice and draw our attention to unfixed sexual categories which the traditional feminism typically has been blinded to

the intersections of multiple power relations that shape women's experiences. By treating white, middle-class female experiences as universal, it can be argued that feminism alienates women that do not situate themselves within this description. Therefore, a feminist identity politics reproduces the harms it seeks to alleviate.

The last criticism of Foucault is the androcentrism and misleading neutrality of his history of sexuality. A brief review what Foucault means by replacing sex-desire with bodies and pleasure is needed. In bio-power, the notion of sex was established as a mean of grouping together in an artificial unity and it enables one to make use of this unity as a causal principle. Hence, sex becomes the 'universal signified.' It is sexuality as sex-desire that Foucault wants to displace because sex-desire is inscribed in bodies that are leaded to either side of heterosexual dichotomy. Sexuality is an activity or lifestyle in which one chooses to engage. Thus, bodies and pleasures are in an unique position in resisting the deployment of sexuality, not outside power relations [34].

"Foucault's theory of power is itself gendered [35]." Foucault's account of sexuality has been criticized for neglecting to account gender differences. By not accounting for gender within his genealogical project, Foucault both limits the efficacy of his bodies and pleasure alternative and perpetuates the subjugation of women in Western philosophy. Foucault cannot reconcile the fact that bodies are perceived in the world as occupying a space within the binary of masculinity and femininity. He only provides a masculine account of sexuality [36]. There are two differences that must be taken into account; women as an object of masculine desire and women's experience their bodies in different ways.

First, despite Foucault's attempt to desexualize bodies, he misses the important point that women's bodies are read as sexual; they are their sex, they are their bodies. Thus, in Western society, women bodies are produced by a phallogentric desire, and therefore creating fundamental inequality in sex relations. While men are expected to desire and actively seek sex, women must provide pleasure, but not desire it. Thus, Foucault's history of sexuality would be a different story if it were written by a woman. For Foucault's project to be completed, the self of the absent other has to be reconstituted by resource outside dominant male discourse [37]. Second, it is important to examine the different ways in which women experience their bodies. Bodies are given role as a site for political struggle and shaped and trained by the networks of social and political power in which they exist. For example, men tend to be thought to take up space larger than women, while women are socialized to take up as little space as possible [38], [39]. Thus, an analysis of bodies and pleasures must take the differences between masculine and feminine bodies seriously.

Some scholars who take up the conceptualization of power treat the account of self-surveillance as a compelling explanatory paradigm for women collusion with patriarchal standard of femininity; however, it is an explanation that must be modified to fit feminist's purposes. For example, Bartky explains two theses. First, femininity, unlike male, is socially constructed. Second, the disciplinary practices that produce the feminine subject must be viewed as peculiarly modern or symptom of the modernization of patriarchal domination. Here, there are three main ideas in which women experiences affect power on their bodies which is different from men. First, feminine body as ideal body; the

internalization of the feminine ideal is evident by the prevalence of dieting, and exercising. Second, women tend to exhibit a specific repertoire of gestures, including reserved movement and limited use of space. Finally, feminine body as an ornament surface, such as the use of cosmetic [40]. Thus, women utilize various techniques of self in order to gain control of their bodies. In Bell's case, Foucault's study of sexuality fits her feminist theory as she explains that the battles against the homophobia of common sense of sexual understandings are identified in lesbian and feminist texts as battles against forms of knowledge. Thus, feminists have been describing as, in parallel with Foucault, the social construction of sexuality through an interrogation of powerful knowledge [41]. As such, although Foucault did not deliberately and specifically include women in *The History of Sexuality*; it is still possible to effectively utilize his theories for feminist scholarship.

It is clear that an identity of heterosexual women traditionally has not been composed of sex as desire. Although they may have had sex in order to reproduce, women have maintained the position of the pleasure-giver or object of desire. Without understanding the objectification of women, Foucault's analysis loses explanatory power in the realm of sexual inequality. However, it is important to realize that the significance of Foucault's omission of gender does not mean that Foucault would have chosen to abandon his method of critique in the case of gender oppression, yet it is Foucault's silent position on feminine that limits his effectiveness for a feminist politics. Thus, feminists ought to examine Foucault's method of critique, and appropriate the aspects that can be incorporated into gender analysis.

Conclusion

Foucault and feminism is an ongoing debate on gender relations as well as an example of the practice of gender politics within the theoretical community. Contemporary feminist's appraisals that are critical to Foucault have taken two basic forms; however, both of which go well beyond usual interpretation of Foucault's works. First, Foucault's agonistic model of power is helpful for feminists to the extent that it disengages us from simplistic, dualistic accounts of power; at the same time for the second form, it obscures many important experiences of power specific to women.

To a greater extent that feminists have drawn on Foucault's work, *Discipline and Punish*, and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault offers an alternative view of seeing the relationship between sexuality and wider social forces to the traditional functionalism. He reverses the traditional understanding of sexuality towards a notion of bodies and pleasures. Here, sexuality is not a given that has to be controlled; it is an historical constructed that

has historical condition of existence. Furthermore, Foucault creates a ground for a positive area of resistance for divergent groups and individual. Thus, we can argue that the criticisms of Foucault on his understanding of theory-justification, power relations, collective politics are unfound, but those of gender neutrality is need to be solved. Although Foucault's work excludes an analysis of gender, it does not preclude the incorporation of gender into Foucauldian methods. In fact, Foucault's problematization method is useful in demonstrating that traditional gender roles are historical and contingent, and thus, suggests the possibility of alternatives to the status quo. Moreover, Foucault's theory of power relations offers a more accurate description of gender inequality than a theory of victimization. Finally, and perhaps most important to the efficiency of feminist politics, Foucault's critique of identity politics offers a means to transcend an exclusionary practices of mainstream feminism.

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