

Foucault, gay, subjectivity and the microsociology of emotions

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Abstract

The paper briefly maps the main contours and consequences of the queer embrace of Foucault's open attack against psychology and psychoanalysis. The queer scholars' refusal to provide a model of gay subjectivity (for fear of contaminating their analyses with the insidious disciplining and normalising effects of psychology) has resulted in a virtual embargo on any meaningful investigation of queer subjectivities. This has proven extremely shortsighted, particularly in the area of HIV/AIDS social theory and activism. Using as points of departure Halperin's book *What do gay men want?* (2007), the paper hints at how the microsociology of emotions can be used to fill a conceptual vacuum in Foucault's understanding of the relationship between the government of self, discourses of power/knowledge and the government of others, thus providing a lifelike and dynamic model of gay subjectivity.

The problem with killing off psychology

‘The entire art of life consists of killing off psychology’ declared Foucault in 1981 (Defert & Ewald 1994, p. 256; Halperin 2007, p. 4). This epigrammatic statement vividly captures the political and ethical attitude shared by so many lesbians, gay men and other queer scholars and activists of his generation ‘who, like him, had spent a lifetime struggling against their own sense of psychological deviance’ (Halperin 2007, p. 4), and who spent enormous energy fending off ‘the unflattering judgments of psychological experts and ... [dodging] the constant, perennial accusations of perversion, sickness, [and] abnormality’ (p. 5). Legions of gay, lesbian, transsexual and queer scholars had thus very good political reasons to embrace Foucault’s attack against the ‘inordinate authority [of ego and depth psychology, and psychoanalysis] in criminal and judicial matters, legal determination of competency for a range of behaviors, and the promulgation of “universal human norms” imposed as measures of judgment on us all’ (Alcoff 1996, p. 120).

It is worth noting here briefly some of the main contours and consequences of this attack against psychology and psychoanalysis in the field of lesbian and gay studies. Queer scholars completely backgrounded gay subjectivity in favour of gay identity as the only politically desirable topic for queer-friendly research, fearing that any ‘disquieting and potentially discreditable details of gay subjectivity’ (Halperin 2007, p. 5) may harm the campaign for lesbian and gay equality. The success of this campaign depended on creating a politically palatable discursive representation of lesbians and gays in order to gain support from reasonable straight people, mostly progressive liberals and social democrats, who could be moved to ‘tolerate [lesbians and gays], or at least not to mistreat them, when one appeals to [the] basic sense of fairness and decency [of the straight majority]’ (Halperin 2007, p. 5). It is for these reasons that the lesbian and gay movement offered a ‘remarkably plausible and persuasive new definition of homosexuality in political rather than psychological terms’ (Halperin 2007, p. 2).

Reinventing homosexuality as a political collective identity meant that lesbians and gay men were no longer social deviants, but ‘normal people’ similar to ‘any ethnic or religious group that is socially marked by its perceived difference from regular folks’ (Halperin 2007, pp. 2–3). This political strategy has had huge political payoffs as witnessed by the assimilation of mostly middle-class white gays and lesbians into mainstream society and gaining a

citizenship status *almost equal* to those of heterosexuals in most countries of the West (Weeks 1998; Plummer 2001; Seidman 2001; Stychin 2001; Oleksy, 2009). It is no wonder then that any gay scholar daring to investigate gay subjectivity is greeted by politically savvy gays and lesbians with a great deal of anxiety and sometimes outright hostility (Farmer 2000).

Psychology and psychoanalysis had become hegemonic master sciences of the human subject in the last two centuries, with a well-established conceptual toolbox to talk about the inner structure of our affects, motivations and experiences. Given this context, the queer refusal to seriously engage with issues of gay subjectivity for fear that the topic is inherently tainted by the disciplining and normalising effects of its privileged psychological and psychoanalytic framing (Halperin 2007, p. 11) meant that queer scholars did not have an alternative conceptual apparatus sufficiently and substantially developed to compete with psychoanalysis and psychology on the issue of queer subjectivity. Treating gay subjectivity simply as a discursive mirage, a byproduct of the discourses on sexualities that developed in the last 180 or so years, proved to be a liability rather than an asset when it came to informing gay-inflected social inquiry aimed at providing pragmatic and workable solutions for the HIV/AIDS crisis affecting gay men. Without an alternative working model of what motivates human/social action, including unprotected sex between gay men, Foucauldian queer scholars ceded considerable conceptual and theoretical ground to psychology and psychoanalysis in the area of HIV/AIDS activism, since the latter already have readymade docking stations to slot in all sorts of largely unexamined and highly speculative judgments about normative psychological health, and pathological gay motivations and behaviours. Simply recovering and exposing exclusions of the homosexual in various discursive structures of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980) is not enough when trying to understand gay sexual situational behaviour. A microsocial theory of what makes risky sex a particularly attractive interaction ritual (Collins 2004) for some gay men is urgently needed.

One of the fundamental conceptual problems with Foucault's view of gay subjectivity is in understanding how the homosexual, who constitutes herself as a subject through the 'scientific' discourses on sexuality that include psychology and psychoanalysis, and who organises her experience of herself through what these discourses offer her, can feel oppressed by those same discourses and hence resist them. If one was solely a byproduct of

particular discursive structure, then where does the feeling of being oppressed by it and the desire and will to resist it come from? There is something that happens in the process of subjective translation of ‘objective’ discourses into subjective experience and practice that is unaccounted for within Foucault’s view of subjectivity (Foucault 2005) and that hints at a human subject that is ‘part of the larger field of social power without however being reducible to it’ (Halperin 2007, p. 105). This thing that is socially constructed, but not entirely, is emotion (Reddy 2001), and this is precisely the topic of a book by a leading Foucauldian gay scholar, David Halperin.

Foregrounding gay subjectivity through the microsociology of gay emotions

Humans, including gay men, have very limited cognitive capacities, and in a time-pressured world of ‘confusion, uncertainty and stress’ (Halperin 2007, p. 108), people make decisions by reducing alternatives and avoiding complex decisions by choosing whatever *feels best* or *least worst* based on previous experience. How risky sex, through abjection, becomes a thrilling cognitive symbol loaded with great emotional energy (Collins 2004) is the focus of Halperin’s *What do gay men want?* (2007). I will paraphrase one of Halperin’s main points here in the following way: risky sex as an interaction ritual is a ‘mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention’ (Collins 2004, p. 8) that produces a momentarily shared reality between gay men thereby generating solidarity among pariahs and symbols of belonging to an abjected social group (Collins 2004, p. 8).

For Halperin, abjection is one of the underlying structural elements of the affective structure of gay men, whereby ‘gay subjectivity is divided against itself, formed in stigma, in rejection by others – especially by those whom one desires – and by oneself’ (Halperin 2007, p. 69). Halperin is consistently sociological in his approach to understanding the social operations of abjection and convincingly shows that abjection ‘does not originate in psychic causes’ (p. 69), and that it is a collective gay emotion arising as a consequence of the heterosexual society’s collective judgment against gay people, only further exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS crisis (p. 69), and a ‘dynamic social process constitutive of the subjectivity of gay men’ (p. 77).

Abjection is also the gay men’s strategic response to their oppression and pathologisation by a society that despises them, a

socially constituted affect that can intensify the determination to survive, can conduce to sexual inventiveness, and can lead to the creation of various devices for extracting heightened pleasure, and even love, from experiences of pain, fear, rejection, humiliation, contempt, shame, brutality, disgust, or condemnation. (Halperin 2007, p. 93)

By seriously examining the emotional nature of the process of subjection or resistance to various discourses of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980), by demonstrating that the relation of oneself to oneself (Foucault 1990) is a site of intense emotional struggle, and by showing how through the self-altering and exploratory effects of emotional expression (Reddy 2001, p. 128) one can modify the intensity or even the intended effects of a particular system of domination, Halperin provides the first necessary, although still not sufficiently microsociological, steps for building a theory of the social dynamics of the gay microworld. He thus grounds Foucault's techniques of the self and his notion of the microphysics of power (Foucault 1980, pp. 55–62) in the microsocial reality of the here and now of how actual gay men (like Jean Genet, Catholic gay writer Marcel Jouhandeau, and gay writer and porn star Scott O'Hara) appropriated or practiced moral and other discourses of power/knowledge.

Halperin provides an exciting opening for a new queer Foucauldian research agenda by seriously tending to the issue of what Foucault called 'the contradictory movements of soul' (1990, p. 26), the emotional struggle involved in how gay men 'comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct [prescribed by the hygienic discourses of public health], the manner in which they obey or resist an interdiction or prescription' (p. 25).

However, Halperin's failure to engage with any of the research on emotions taking place in anthropology (Wikan 1990), history (Reddy 2001) and sociology (Barbalet 2002; Turner & Stets 2005), particularly in the field of the microsociology of emotions (Collins 2004; Scheff 1994), deprives him of the great opportunity to use richly developed conceptual toolkits and insights, and thus make a clearer and more straightforward organic connection to the lifeworld of gay men. The spiritualised framing of his analysis of the social roots of gay abjection is too mystifying to be translated into a concrete research agenda or plan for political action. As Scheff points out, rarefied and mystifying analysis 'without [a clear]

organic connection to the lifeworld has had uncertain and only sporadic influence in the struggles of the ruled groups, the working class, students, women, [gay men] and the consumers of professional services' (Scheff 1990, p. 101).

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