Book Review


Let's escape as much as possible from the types of relations which society proposes for us and try to create in the empty space where we are new relational possibilities.

Michel Foucault

When he died from AIDS in 1984, Michel Foucault left behind a substantive corpus of work—highly original, controversial, brilliant—which has yet to be fully appreciated outside the academy. The author of such books as Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Madness and Civilization, The Order of Things, The History of Sexuality, Foucault was considered by friend and foe alike to be an iconoclast, a provocative and incisive thinker, an outcast, an anarchist, a writer whose dense prose made him inaccessible to many, and in some circles, a gay hero.

David M. Halperin (author of One Hundred Years of Homosexuality, co-editor of The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader) has written an angry, sometimes excessive, but much needed defense of Foucault's life and work in Saint Foucault: Toward a Gay Hagiography. Deeply troubled by some recent biographies on Foucault (e.g., those by David Macey and James Miller), and the ways he sees Foucault's life and philosophy distorted and trashed there, Halperin wants to rectify the public record and give back to Foucault his gay/queer humanity and his stature as one of the 20th century's leading philosophers.

The book is divided into roughly two sections. The first section, "The Queer Politics of Michel Foucault," is Halperin's own kind of "queer" rendering of Foucault—who he really was, what he believed in, what he meant by "the politics of resistance." Before he was ever identified as a "gay thinker," Foucault had written extensively on how relations of power throughout society's major institutions—prisons, hospitals, schools—are constantly manipulated to normalize and subject individuals.
People are continually defined, delineated, categorized, given roles to play, told what behaviors are "good" and "bad." Even in the modern age of supposed enlightened liberal democratic government, the totalizing effect of power—perhaps most strikingly drawn in the arena of sexuality—still seeks to identify and label people as "normal" (heterosexual) and "abnormal" (homosexual). For Foucault, even the gay liberation movement, aside from its more radical queer fringes, has been co-opted into a normalizing discourse, which states that what gays really want is to "be just like everyone else."

Being gay, according to Foucault, means to "challenge the production of truth as power replicates it." In other words, the truths society tells about homosexuality and heterosexuality need to be subverted, resisted, reinterpreted, theatricalized (such as in camp and drag), so that terms like "gay" and "straight" begin to lose meanings that heretofore repress, limit, deny, or value one kind of person, or set of experiences, over another. Says Foucault, "Sex should be the basis for a radical critique of disciplinary, regimented, conformist society." Halperin adds, "And so if Michel Foucault had never existed, queer politics would have had to invent him."

Foucault's last major work was devoted to the study of sexuality, and, before his death, he had finished three volumes: The History of Sexuality, The Use of Pleasure, and The Care of the Self. In the latter two books, Foucault attempted to recreate/reconfigure the sexual ethics of ancient Greece as perhaps a code by which modern homosexuals might fashion themselves. According to Foucault, the Greeks developed a very complex aesthetics of experience, which involved self-restraint, right living, and carefully delineated sexual/social roles evolving through ongoing negotiations between partners. He saw this "care of the self" as a way for modern gays to transform themselves, to create personal freedom from within, rather than having some societal notion of freedom (via civil rights) imposed. It was not, as some have misconstrued, a license for unbridled debauchery, but rather, a carefully elaborated, consensual path to various forms of pleasure, including S&M.

Halperin is very much taken by Foucault's thinking—which he sees as the product of a complex and unique mind—and it is out of deep respect for Foucault, the individual, that he lambastes Foucault's critics in the second portion of his book, "The Describable Life of Michel Foucault." He is unrelentingly critical of Foucault's biographers (and, it seems, biography writing in general) whom he sees creating their own versions of Foucault complete with lurid details about his supposed S&M orgies in San Francisco bath houses, his knowingly infecting sex partners with HIV, and his suicidal fantasies.