

Foucault, language and freedom: a simple introduction

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In the thirty years since his death in 1984, the work of the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault has moved solidly into the mainstream of methodology in the social sciences. This is a very good thing. Foucault teaches us to see the world in a fundamentally new and liberating way, and everyone needs to hear his message. Unfortunately, it is still shrouded in mystery for most people. Even the versions of "Foucault for dummies" I have found on line are way too complicated for normal folk. However, I am not an academic, and normal folk are the bread and butter of my daily interactions. I think Foucault is really important and I need to explain to them why, in terms they can understand. So what follows is my attempt to do this.

First a disclaimer. I have read quite a bit of Foucault, much of it in the original French, and some secondary literature, and I think I have enough of a general background in philosophy and social theory to understand his thought, but I don't claim to be an expert and this is definitely my spin on what I think the importance of his thought is today, in the contemporary environment we face in the West. It makes no claims to be exhaustive and indeed on some points I will disagree with him and present my own thoughts, while of course making clear when this is the case. This text is also not meant as an introduction to reading Foucault himself, except in a very general sense: I paraphrase him liberally without much concern to anchor my comments in his own terminology or in specific references to the texts. For those who need it, a decent introduction which is more scholarly in its intent is the anthology edited by Dianna Taylor, *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts* (Acumen: Durham UK, 2011), especially the introduction and chapters 4 through 7 and 12, to which I am indebted in what follows.

So who was Michel Foucault?

In the popular imagination, Foucault is often lumped together with his contemporaries, French post-structuralist philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. So the first thing to be said is that this assimilation is completely mistaken. Lyotard, Derrida and company are notoriously impenetrable thinkers who seem (to me) to revel in obscurity. Foucault's thought, subject matter and style have little in common with that of these contemporaries. While technical at times, and not always a model of clarity, Foucault always remains readable and engaged with problems the importance of which is perfectly obvious. I could attempt further to situate him in the history of thought, but I think this is unnecessary for present purposes. What is important to understand is that Foucault is an extremely original thinker directly concerned with social issues and justice and who should be approached on his own merits. Foucault can be more usefully compared with another contemporary, less well-known outside France but still extremely influential, Pierre Bourdieu – but I'll save that for another time.

How society and culture, through language, makes us who we are

This is the key question that Foucault sets out to answer. To do so, he needs to show us that ideas, institutions and even bodily sensations that we take for granted and assume to be "real" are in fact generated by our environment: they find their origin in culture, serve as vehicles to perpetuate power structures within society, and we enforce them ourselves. While this might seem obvious enough from anthropological studies which look at how ideas function in very different societies to our own (a synchronic or horizontal approach), Foucault's method is diachronic/vertical, in other words historical: he takes us on a tour through our own history, showing the function that ideas played in the past and the changes to which they have been subject over time. This allows us to disidentify with these ideas and subject them to critical re-evaluation.

The issues with which Foucault engaged in depth include the prison system, mental health and sexuality, but his approach has been used to study many other social institutions, whether tangible (schools, the military, the legal system...), normative (age and gender related norms, monogamy...) or purely conceptual (concepts such as patriotism, honor, self-sacrifice...). Actually it's quite possible that several of those studies haven't been done yet. But all of them definitely should be.

Let's take an example. To illustrate the concept, it is necessary to talk about some things you probably believe really do exist and may well be shocked to hear do not – at least in the sense you had assumed they did. This is going especially to be the case if the terms in question are central to your self-identification. This is a question I have discussed before in relation to [sexual labels](#). Even if you may be indifferent to some of the concepts, it is pretty certain there will be at least one or two which you are going to struggle to let go of, or to think differently about. There is a good reason for this. We think using the categories we have learnt. Unless we redefine them or come up with new ones, it is difficult to think differently. We also act on the basis of the same categories. If, for example, society works with simple binary oppositions like gay/straight, male/female or Madonna/whore – and it does – it really may matter little how you would personally like to nuance where you think you belong; you will frequently find yourself being assigned to one or other category anyway, and the best you can do may be to go for the one which is least bad. Of course, 'bad' is itself an undefined concept – some people will choose based on where they perceive their own self-interest to lie, whilst others will choose on grounds of principle. Given the 'stickiness' of these concepts, they are hard to change – but over time they do change, and whilst Foucault doesn't tell us much about how or why they change – because this very much depends on the concept in question – he does show us that these concepts have been culturally constructed, and for this very reason can be culturally deconstructed.

So let me try "heterosexual". This will hit enough people's self-identification, does have a basis in Foucault's own work (although I develop it liberally), and illustrates the general idea as well as being "familiar" enough to most people that pretty well everyone thinks they know what it means (even if they may themselves find the term unsatisfactory). But I could go with "autistic", "disabled", "monogamous", "feminist", "democratic", "just".... I could go with pretty well anything, and not just adjectives either. For example you may think you know what "jealousy" is, you may think it's something biological and innate, and you may even be uncritical of episodes of it which you

encounter. But it is almost certain that this is a composite emotion constructed out of the need to maintain monogamy and the power structures of sexual scarcity on which it is based. It is not that you don't experience it, but what "it" is, as well as the purpose it serves, is way less clear than you probably think. But for more on that example, see [here](#).

Every word has a history, and "heterosexual" is no different. Indeed, I have written about it already [\[link\]](#). Most people think that words "discover" the nature of things; that they label pre-existing realities. At the risk of simplifying, some words do seem to do this, and the more concrete the word, the more likely that this is the case, which is why we are accustomed to thinking like this. For example, we can imagine a world in which the metal "magnesium" exists, but has not yet been recognized as a distinct entity. Perhaps it is frequently thought just to be a form of aluminum. As we discover specific properties of magnesium which allow us to tell it apart from aluminum, we realize there is something distinct, and we give it a name. Henceforth we can talk about it with much greater ease than we could before.

This appears to be a straightforward case of linguistic "progress". However, it is more the exception than the rule, and for most words we should be on our guard against this simplistic assumption. Here, Foucault is building on solid ground; this fact has been well known since Wittgenstein. Words have a history, and they often do not refer to "things out there"; their meaning also shifts over time and is not constant either across groups or from one writer to another, even at a given point in time. The meaning of a word is only ever an approximation, and the less it refers to something which exists and is distinct in an obvious sense, the more it is better thought of as a cloud of related meanings rather than a precise label.

The word "heterosexual" came into use in connection with the word "homosexual". It basically denoted "not homosexual" and therefore was the antonym of "homosexual" within a schema which divided the world into two camps, homosexual and heterosexual (since then, the language used for sexual orientation has developed further, of course; I am not ignoring this fact, but I want to get at the meaning as originally conceived, also because, even if there are now other labels, "heterosexual" is still generally thought of as denoting "not homosexual", most of the other groups who use different labels being anyway invisible in public discourse).

Words which split the world up into two camps are inherently suspicious, because there are not many of them which seem to correspond to a more or less objective reality. Perhaps male/female would be a fair counterexample, but most words do not have or need opposites if they refer to something in the real world. For example, there is no word which means "not magnesium". Most classes of things in the world which can be broken down into distinct categories also manifest more than two such categories: for example solid/liquid/gas, types of mineral, continents etc.

When we encounter this type of binary opposition, it is very typical that one of the pair of terms is "unmarked" and the other "marked". This means that there is a general assumption that people (or other classes, but let's stick to people) fall under one of the terms, and only by exception do they fall under the other. If nothing is said, the "default", unmarked term is the one that applies. In this case, "homosexual" is the marked category and "heterosexual" the unmarked one. It is not just that most people are "heterosexual"; society itself is heterosexual in that it is predicated on heterosexuality and mostly takes it for granted. Homosexuals will frequently have awkwardly to explain themselves,

to make special arrangements, to correct their interlocutor: heterosexuals will not. This mechanism of marking is not purely probabilistic: it is not neutral. It is not a fair assumption simply because it applies in most cases. Rather, it is part of a linguistic apparatus which functions to perpetuate certain cultural values (resistance to these values usually entails adopting the marked category voluntarily and endeavoring to undermine its connotations from within; as I discussed in relation to feminism [here](#)).

In fact, "heterosexual" is not a term which correctly and neutrally denotes something which applies to the majority of the population at all, except in the very trivial sense of being the opposite of a term which applies to a minority. Rather, the term erases many differences amongst members of the class it signifies, and enforces cultural values of its own, focusing on sexual attraction and behavior to the exclusion of other forms of interpersonal behavior (same-sex intimacy, even non-sexual) inconsistent with its core assumptions as well as non-sexual determinants of social behavior between the sexes.

As we have established that the term "heterosexual" simply means "not homosexual", let me for simplicity continue by discussing the term "homosexual" itself. If this term does not designate something that objectively exists "out there", what is the relationship of it to actual facts, and how has it changed those facts or the social dialogue surrounding them?

Foucault does not argue that terms such as this are deprived of *any* anchor in the real world at all. On the contrary, some such anchor is usually required. Terms, however, operate a selection which could (in principle at least) have been made in another way, and divide the world up in ways which may prevent us from seeing alternative configurations. They are usually also conveniently vague. In the case of "homosexual", it is not clear whether it refers simply to a preferential tendency (nor the extent to which this tendency may or may not be exclusive) to engage in sexual behavior with persons of the same biological sex, or whether it also encompasses "romantic attraction" to members of that same sex (whatever "romantic attraction" itself may be).

This ambiguity is fundamental to the social function that the term performs. It ghettoizes, or at least constitutes a threat of ghettoization in respect of, all persons who deviate from the enforced (heterosexual) social norm. It therefore does not simply name a pre-existing class, but allows for raising suspicions as to the belonging to the dominant heterosexual class of any person who in any way may go beyond, in terms of same-sex intimacy (whether social or sexual), whatever any member of that dominant class may, for whatever reason, at any point in time consider should constitute a useful limit on the behavior of others around them. In other words, it is essentially a socially sanctioned tool for arbitrarily ostracizing anyone who may constitute a threat to the established order. It is a tool of power, available for anyone to wield (though be careful it does not return to haunt you). Even increasing acceptance of gay rights in society has so far not fundamentally altered, it seems to me, this basic function.

Homosexual behavior and preferences have of course always existed, but they have not always been stigmatized or even viewed as exceptional, and when they have been this has taken very different forms. In some societies, such behavior even applies generally (at least to males) in certain contexts, and it constituted the highest form of love for the ancient Greeks (or at least for Plato and some of his contemporaries: although whether or not this love should be chaste was a major cultural sticking

point – as Foucault analyses in depth in Volume II of his *History of Sexuality*). Homosexual behavior existed, in combination with other forms of behavior, without any need to name it or, when naming it, by employing very different concepts which "cut up" the world in different ways.

I will not get into the circumstances which led to the formation of the concept of "homosexual", but I would like to focus on its effects. Foucault predicts that these will often be ambivalent.

Firstly, it should be obvious by now that the main function of the term "homosexual" is not to denote the behavior (or any other relevant characteristic) of the group it apparently names. Homosexuals themselves did not invent the term in search for some label of identity; it was invented by those to whom it was designed *not* to pertain. The term therefore polices the sexual (and even non-sexual) behavior of the majority; it constitutes merely the mirror image of behavior elevated into a social norm, and by being the mirror image, it conveniently disguises its true function. It does not of course (and could not) do so out of nothing – attitudes to same-sex intimacy have rarely, if ever, been neutral. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that it codifies these attitudes in a way which is innovatory. By accepting the labels and the binary division it proposes – and the temptation to do so is as great as is the potential individual utility of the concept in games of power – members of society cooperate in the creation of new norms of behavior, thereby undermining their own freedom. The term "homosexual", and its more or less derogatory colloquial equivalents, will be used in school playgrounds and in later adult life to ostracize and construct hierarchies (Ellen Feder refers to this as "*a panoptic apparatus that operates to ensure properly gendered subjects*" and notes its ability to revert behavior to the social norm notwithstanding parental deviations from it [1]).

In this way the individual is problematized and called to order, whilst the social practice escapes scrutiny. Heterosexuality becomes self-policing, even in contexts where overt homosexual behavior is in fact commonplace (but still surrounded by shame). Society does not really care what homosexuals do; it cares what heterosexuals do. This is why the use of the term "heterosexual" (as opposed to what it merely denotes) almost always contains within it at least a latent homophobia, a prohibition on any form of same-sex intimacy which the individual typically unquestioningly accepts. The neologism does not reflect reality – it creates it.

It is worth, I think, pausing to note at this point that this mechanism is not maladaptive or sinister *per se*. It is simply the way in which, in pre-agricultural times, tribal coherence was maintained and mechanisms of culture could be capitalized and passed from generation to generation. The same mechanism doubtless operates in many cases in the contemporary world in a manner which is desirable. Nor is it incapable of innovation, even if it certainly manifests a conservative bias. Indeed, it is only through such a mechanism that social innovation can be spread and made effective at all. Its all-pervading, "panoptic" character also reflects the conditions of tribal life, in which privacy and self-realization are foreign concepts. The mechanism itself is therefore not at fault, but rather (aspects of) the social capital which it transmits as the latter has been accumulated and shaped over the course of history in response to contingent external factors, attempts by entitled groups at maintaining hegemonic social control and corresponding attempts at resistance, which Foucault suggests are at least to some degree inevitable owing to an innate bodily insubordination [2], by those disadvantaged by the dominant discourse.

Language and power

Power, therefore, resides for Foucault in language as a repository of social norms, and exercises its effects in a way which is diffuse and self-enforcing; it does not emanate from a single source of authority as was generally supposed in the past. In the past, it may perhaps have been enough to forbid certain egregious forms of behavior which represented an obvious threat to the sovereign or the church (though I am not sure that Foucault is fully right about this); modern societies, on the other hand, require techniques which actually *generate* behavior of a certain sort, even of a novel sort. This process, almost by definition, works to the benefit of the dominating social classes and to the detriment of everyone else.

At least in the short term: because Foucault sees language as productive of new social forms which contain within themselves the seeds of their own destruction and enable the problematization of conflicts latent in earlier times. This process has endless ripples and iterations and is subject to a law of unintended effect. Because we have the notion of "homosexual", homosexuals, by which I mean all those whose behavior assigns them to the group or who voluntarily adhere to it (but no-one else: "heterosexual" is no rallying-cry) have the possibility to find each other, to group together, to create a subculture with its own forms of thought, in relative isolation moreover from contamination by the dominant culture since its members, being already disfavored, have less to lose. This subculture is able to think about sexuality and about sexual behavior, and indeed form actual bonds, with a freedom which "heterosexuals" often envy. Inevitably, at least as long as it is not violently repressed, this constitutes a laboratory to incubate new attitudes in the wider society in the longer term.

In the absence of any controlling "mastermind", linguistic innovations of this kind are inherently unable to imagine and to plan for these long-run effects. Essentially they amount to the recognition of a threat and a short-term response to it (along the lines of *divide et impera* – divide and rule), at the expense of greater threats later on. In this way, even what appear to be repressive institutions may in fact serve social progress over the longer run.

So language is not neutral; it is a battlefield of competing interests and an arena within which conflicts are played out.

Resistance

This brings us on to what Foucault has to say, or implies, for successful strategies of resistance to domination. To continue our example, it may be that being forced to adopt the label of "heterosexual" I have lost some freedom, not only externally in terms of how I interact with society, but even in terms of how I am able to conceive of myself and the identity I (or if not I, then at least most people) unquestioningly adopt. Is there, at the same time, something I have gained?

As I have just explained, the *mise en quarantaine* of a group with which I share certain characteristics (be it directly in terms of my own sexual or emotional proclivities, or more tangentially in terms, perhaps, of similarly aspiring to a greater freedom in forming and structuring relationships) brings into being a forum in which a certain amount of experimentation may take place which would not be tolerated within the mainstream society of which I am a part. I may appeal to the experience of that

community in support of my own demands for greater freedom. I will argue, "if they can do it, why not I?" This strategy was not available to me when the prohibition on my conduct was more latent or indirect.

I may also engage battle on the linguistic battlefield itself, although at the risk, omnipresent, of further fragmenting my natural base of allies, that is the class of the dominated generally (and of course I am aware that I dominate at the same time as being dominated). Foucault argues that the concept of sexuality itself is a recent neologism with no clear meaning (but quite a clear function). The concept of "homosexual" may seem, in hindsight, to have been a naïve attempt to regulate what is an increasingly chaotic linguistic minefield. I am certainly unaccepting of the term "heterosexual", even if I recognize that I am going to be assigned to it anyway (because the alternative term is clearly descriptively inaccurate). At whatever opportunity, I will grasp for better language. The whole category of "[queer](#)" represents what has been a perhaps surprisingly successful attempt to spawn approaches which rest on the pure and simple rejection of confining categorizations, albeit one which has so far failed to gain much traction on the part of the gender-conforming "heterosexual" population.

My purpose here is certainly not to suggest a degree of historical inevitability in the move towards greater liberty. Foucault himself does not seem to have been tempted by such a conclusion. It is, however, to point to possibilities and to the inevitability that any linguistic state of the world is fluid and will, over time, change. This change is the work of social actors responding to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Foucault's ethical stance

So whilst there may be no guarantee of success, strategies of resistance are at least available to us. But *why* should we resist, and what goals should that resistance pursue? If, as Foucault argues, my sense of myself is constituted together with language, and my possibilities are limited by it, with no possibility of real escape or of fundamental rupture, and if any future sense of myself will similarly be constituted, am I at complete liberty to imagine anything and call it into being, and if so, how might I recruit enough others to my cause?

In my opinion, Foucault is at his least convincing in responding to this question. Whilst he holds to a view of constrained or "situated" freedom [3], his prescriptions amount to a restatement of existentialist precepts *a la* Heidegger or Sartre. Foucault takes as given that we should pursue "truth" but wishes to break from what he considers the Faustian bargain whereby it is available only by submitting to power: by taking ones allotted place in a society which dispenses truth only through approved institutional mechanisms. Rather than play this game, Foucault appeals for a resurrection of what he considers to be the ethical basis of classical Greek and Latin philosophy. This he refers to as "care of the self". Essentially, the argument is that one should actively seek to throw off the chains of conditioning which have come to one as a member of society. What precisely one might find looking beyond, however, is not clear. Like Sartre, Foucault seems to view this as essentially a creative act, and how the creative act of the individual eventually impacts upon society more widely is left unexplained. The whole "back-to-the-future" nature of this manoeuvre is unsatisfying: even if

the self is to be constructed rather than discovered (and so its "truth" does not exist), one is being prescribed, it would seem, a heroic romanticism which has the character of a sublimation.

Foucault therefore comes across, to me at least, as espousing a relatively severe form of asceticism, based on a thoroughgoing sceptical attitude of refusal (*a la* Hume or Descartes), a position of which his own analysis seems to undermine the possibility.

This stance certainly captures something of what I would also view as a correct ethical orientation towards the fact of our conceptual co-creation of the world. I agree with Foucault that "*freedom is not simply a matter of being left alone but also a matter of re-making ourselves into what we would like to be*" [4]. But in my view, Foucault's prescription is also missing something, indeed a great deal. What I take from it is a concern to engage battle strategically there where the instruments of domination actually operate, which is within the structure of thought. Philosophy, however, is not the sole tool of so doing – thankfully. The actual manifestation in the world of alternative models seems to have at least as much importance and power as expounding these philosophically.

As my readers will know, I am not attracted by Foucault's ascetic prescriptions, which like any asceticism seem to me inevitably to buttress the ego and thereby to go astray. There also seems to me something inconsistent in determining that the mechanisms of power play within interpersonal space, and nevertheless proposing to modify them in a way which is solipsistic. There is little doubt that Foucault himself has been successful in doing this, but that his approach is generalizable or sufficient is much less evident, and in any case the correspondence between what is enduringly important in his life's work and his preoccupation with "care of the self" is open to discussion. I personally believe that interpersonal mechanisms need to be found and prescriptions adopted which go beyond the purely conceptual into reshaping core institutions of society, according to a battle plan which recognizes where the greatest vulnerabilities and potential for impact lie [5].

Notes

[1] in Taylor (ed., 2011), pp. 59f.

[2] See Oksala, in *op.cit.*, p. 93

[3] May, in *op.cit.*, p. 82

[4] May, in *op.cit.*, p. 79

[5] My own focus has been on uncovering the structure of patriarchy and the key patriarchal institution of monogamy: see [here](#) and [here](#). There are of course many other potential avenues.