

Freud Beyond Foucault: Thinking Pleasure as a Site of Resistance

Robert Trumbull

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON, BOTHELL

ABSTRACT: Though Foucault displayed a marked ambivalence toward Freud, in the final stages of his work, this ambivalence hardened into a resistance. Hence, in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Freud is situated squarely on the side of power. It is in fact in leaving Freud behind, Foucault suggests, that we might begin to imagine “a different economy of bodies and pleasures.” Against this notion, I argue that a return to Freud’s most radical understanding of this enigmatic term *pleasure* provides the resources for thinking one of the central problems emerging out of Foucault’s later work: how to understand pleasure as a possible site of resistance to the regime of normalizing power.

KEYWORDS: Foucault, Freud, pleasure, power, sexuality

As Derrida (1998, 103–4) showed in a later essay on Foucault’s relationship to psychoanalysis, Foucault displayed a marked ambivalence toward Freud, sometimes putting him on the side of the exclusion of madness and sometimes putting him on the side of those eager to listen to it. Yet, in the final stages of Foucault’s work, this ambivalence hardened into a resistance. By the time of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Freud is situated squarely on the side of power. It is precisely in leaving Freud behind, Foucault suggests in *Volume 1*’s final pages, that we might begin to imagine “a different

economy of bodies and pleasures” (1978, 159). In the late Foucault, what is necessary is thus not a reinvigorated psychoanalysis but, rather, a new ethics of pleasure, one that is said to offer a way out of the “austere monarchy of sex” (1978, 159). Pleasure, in the texts we have from this period, is then explicitly identified by Foucault (1978, 157) as one of the central rallying points in the counterattack on normalizing power.

Foucault’s call for a new ethics of pleasure has attracted a fair amount of attention in the secondary literature. We know from these accounts that the invocation of pleasure as a possible site of resistance in *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* is not simply an offhand remark. Foucault (see 1980, 191) returns to this point in a handful of interviews from the same period and in fact addresses it at length, albeit at a somewhat different level, in the subsequent volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. Working schematically, we could summarize Foucault’s thinking in this area in the following way: Pleasure represents a potential rallying point in the counterattack on sexuality—it makes possible a strategic resistance—insofar as it lies, to a certain extent, outside the discursive terms of the forms of power-knowledge that constitute “sexuality.” As Foucault makes clear in *Volume 1*, the axiomatic terms at the center of the regime of sexuality are *sex-desire*, a formula in which pleasure is conspicuously absent. Rather, sexuality as a *dispositif* operates by isolating “desire” as the crucial term coming under investigation, inquiry, categorization, and diagnosis on multiple fronts.

Foucault’s well-known rejection of the repressive hypothesis in fact turns on this point. He is able to demonstrate its shortcomings precisely insofar as he shows how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical discourse is not in fact silent about sexuality but, rather, engaged in a vast proliferation of various “problematizations” around sexuality. In this expansion of the discourse around sexuality, Foucault argues, desire—whether normal, aberrant, or in development—comes to constitute the very truth of my being at its core. Hence the criticism of Freud advanced in *The History of Sexuality*: Freud’s “genius,” as Foucault (1978, 159) puts it, lies in convincing us that the kernel of our being, the truth about ourselves and our behavior, is to be found in the depths of our desire. In this way, Freud serves as the most effective purveyor of an apparatus of sexuality that actively produces us as subjects *subject to* interminable analysis as to our innermost desires.

The task of deciphering desire is thus at the very center of the new *scientia sexualis* as Foucault presents it. Yet pleasure lies, to some extent, outside its reach, he suggests. In a frequently cited dialogue from 1983, Foucault

makes this point by sketching the major differences between the modern regime of sexuality and the various arts of existence he finds in classical Greece and imperial Rome, remarking that, while in antiquity pleasure was the focus of a whole series of practices, today, “nobody knows what it is!” (1998b, 269). While he does not develop this thought further in the text in question, in other interviews from roughly the same period it becomes clear that it is precisely this lack of knowledge around pleasure in our current moment that provides Foucault with reasons to affirm it. As Arnold Davidson has noted in his discussion of these issues, however we define the experience of pleasure, it carries with it a certain “lack of psychological depth” that makes it stubbornly resistant to categorization and examination by the science of sex-desire (2001, 212). Indeed, from a Foucauldian perspective, sexuality as an apparatus ultimately works, Ladelle McWhorter (1999, 180–86) has argued, by assigning and affixing *identities* to subjects conceived on the basis of this logic of sex-desire. Thus, operating somewhere beyond the domain of subjective intentionality, the cultivation of experiences of pleasure has the potential to disrupt the smooth operations of normalizing power.

Hence we find Foucault (1998c, 165; see also 1998a, 137), in a separate interview, advocating the development of new capacities for pleasure (which are clearly not limited to sex, for him) through a whole set of transformative practices. The aim of such a practice is, Foucault specifies at one point, the practice of freedom in “a process of invention” (1998c, 170). His concern, in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, with various classical ascetic practices, understood as “arts of existence,” is equally to be seen in this light. While Foucault is clear that it is not possible for us to simply step outside the regime of sexuality and adopt these practices from the past, he does suggest that they offer at least a glimpse of possible alternatives to the “austere monarchy of sex.” The genealogy of practices and care of the self he offers in the final two volumes is thus meant, in part, to illuminate the thoroughly historical and strategic character of our contemporary sense of ourselves, one produced by our position within prevailing networks of power. We then begin to see that our identities, as “moderns,” are not simply given but historically constructed and thus alterable through certain strategic practices. The cultivation of pleasure thus serves as privileged example of such practices for Foucault.

The difficulty, however, is that the status of pleasure is in fact complicated in Foucault. This complication appears in the other celebrated

passage of *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, the passage in which Foucault speaks of “perpetual spirals” of pleasure and power. There, he describes the widening deployment of sexuality in the nineteenth century as giving rise to what he calls “a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure” (1978, 44). Foucault then refers to certain mechanisms of power-knowledge as having a “double impetus” of pleasure and power: “The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. . . . These circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*” (1978, 45; see also 1980, 186). Here, normalizing power and pleasure are not opposed but, rather, overlap and reinforce one another. The figure of the spiral thus crystallizes one of Foucault’s critical points in *Volume 1*: with the deployment of sexuality in the nineteenth century, pleasure is not, as the repressive hypothesis would have it, excluded and suppressed but, on the contrary, intensified, made an integral part of the operations of power. As Tim Dean has argued, it even seems that “Foucault is suggesting that there are no pleasures that are *not* contaminated by power . . . as if there were some pure pleasure exterior to and independent of power relations” (2012, 481).

This other conception of pleasure in fact follows directly from the thinking of power Foucault develops in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*. If power is everywhere, and is not simply privative but formative, as Foucault emphasizes, then we are constituted, from the outset, as subjects capable of pleasure by networks of power. This means, first, that pleasure is always already penetrated by power and, second, that resistant, counterattacking pleasure, whatever it is, has to originate within the power network. What we have here, then, is a more complex picture of the relation between pleasure and power than we had initially. In this fuller picture, sometimes pleasure works in accordance with power, and sometimes, in ways that are still fairly difficult to pin down, pleasure works against it. Jana Sawicki, in an excellent treatment of these issues, sums up the situation this way: “Presumably . . . pleasures bound to the apparatus of sexuality can be double-edged. They can be used in the service of problematic power relations; yet they can also be a source of their redirection, reversal, or

diminution” (2010, 191). How exactly this is possible—how exactly pleasure can be a site of resistance—is precisely what Foucault does not quite manage to think, however. Indeed, I will argue, against philosophers such as Sawicki and McWhorter, that it is Freud—or better yet, a certain Freud—who in fact offers the most powerful resources to Foucault here.

Now, I am not the first to suggest that Foucault requires the supplementation of psychoanalysis. Teresa de Lauretis (2008), Judith Butler (1997), and Leo Bersani (1996) have all advanced similar claims. My treatment of Foucault differs from theirs insofar as I argue that the Freud who matters most for the thinking of power and pleasure suggested in Foucault is the speculative Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the Freud who pushes psychoanalytic thinking to its outermost limit. Where previous accounts have sought to integrate into Foucault’s framework a range of psychoanalytic concepts he was clearly reluctant to adopt, the approach I elaborate here refers Foucault to a Freud engaged in a radical rethinking of this enigmatic term *pleasure*—even if this thinking of pleasure emerges only at the margins, as it were, of *Beyond* and the network of texts associated with it.

This move is necessary insofar as there is something not quite satisfactory about the Foucauldian response to the central question we are exploring, the question of pleasure’s dual status within the regime of sexuality. The best articulation of Foucault’s approach is to be found in McWhorter and Sawicki. The core of Sawicki’s argument, for instance, rests on the conception of pleasure with which I began. Because pleasure is “less discursively overdetermined” by normalizing power, she (2010, 196) argues, Foucault can point to the possibility of other ways of experiencing pleasure that can potentially resist it. The extent of its potential to do so depends on the historically available practices at one’s disposal. But the point, Sawicki explains, is to experiment with new forms of pleasure less bound up with normalizing technologies of power and institutions in view of undoing, to whatever degree possible, what both she and McWhorter describe as the calcified forms of identity proper to desiring subjects produced within the apparatus of sexuality.

While this account is cogent, still, I think we need a deeper account of how this is possible from within a power network that actively produces the bodies and subjects on which it acts. The issue is how this is possible within a network that, as Foucault put it forcefully in an interview from 1977, “materially penetrate[s] the body in depth without depending even on the mediation of the subject’s own representations” and “which acts as the formative

matrix . . . within which we seem at once to recognize and lose ourselves” (1980, 186).¹ Indeed, while in interviews on pleasure Foucault does seem to think its affirmative character in the terms sketched by Sawicki and McWhorter, the account of how pleasure carries liberatory potential remains underexplained. To take one example, Foucault (1998c, 165–70) argues in places that sadomasochism forms one key place where resistant pleasure emerges. Yet, in the 1974–75 lectures in *Abnormal*, Foucault ultimately suggests that the idea of “unbounded [or perverse] pleasure that escapes the heterosexual and exogamous norm” actually supports, rather than undermines, the regime of sexuality, insofar as the regime always moves to regulate and diagnose such pleasures (2003, 75). If I turn to Freud in this context, then, it is because the conception of power and pleasure found in Foucault requires additional resources beyond those Foucault himself offers.

What, then, does Freud offer? In short, he offers an alternate conception of “the economy of pleasure” at the level of the subject. And this alternate economy in Freud, I am arguing, allows us to think the possibility of the new “economy of bodies and pleasures” invoked by Foucault. Even if Freud never uses the term *subject* in his psychoanalytic works, we will see that he allows us to grasp how pleasure operates in this economy. We can then use this approach to reinterpret Foucault’s call for an ethics of pleasure as a practice of freedom.

As I have already indicated, the key move in Freud is to be found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Now, I do not wish to engage here the concept of the death drive advanced in this text. Exploring this concept would take us too far afield with respect to the terms of the discussion outlined to this point. Rather, if, as I claim, Freud’s thinking offers something to a Foucauldian approach here, it does so in a more direct way, in its conception of pleasure. This logic in Freud stands to some extent apart from his speculations on the possibility of a drive operating independently of the pleasure principle, what he had to this point seen as the central guiding mechanism of psychic life.

In the present context, what is most crucial in *Beyond* is Freud’s suggestive reworking, in this text, of the relation between pleasure—which, from the very beginning, he always thinks in terms of energetics—and the mechanism of what he calls “binding.” Now, it is important to note that these terms long precede *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. They play a key role in the foundational model of the psychic apparatus outlined in chapter 7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), and in fact, as early as 1895 Freud was already thinking of the psyche as regulated primarily by the avoidance of unpleasure, defined as an increase in excitation circulating within the

apparatus. What he then later formulates in his metapsychological works as the pleasure *principle* is thus understood from quite early on as a principle of constancy, which seeks to reduce excitation within the apparatus, coming both from the body and from the outside, to as low a level as possible. A reserve of some quantity of excitation is necessary, however, Freud quickly realizes, for the living organism to be able to meet “the exigencies of life,” as he puts it in the abandoned paper of 1895, the “Project for a New Scientific Psychology” (1:297).² A reserve of energy must be maintained so that it can pursue appropriate satisfactions with respect to certain endogenous excitatory demands, those having to do with hunger and respiration, for instance.

Consequently, Freud theorizes early on that the pursuit of pleasure has to be deferred, or modified, in accordance with a “reality principle.” The distinction between the pleasure principle and the reality principle thus corresponds to the corollary distinction Freud makes between the two different “processes” or functions operating in the psychic apparatus: the primary process characteristic of the unconscious, oriented toward immediate discharge, and the secondary process characteristic of the preconscious-conscious system, which retains a quantity of excitation in a controlled state, in order to allow for the procurement of certain satisfactions later on. What distinguishes the two processes, Freud had maintained from the very beginning, is that the energy in the primary process is freely circulating, while the energy in the secondary one is, on the contrary, “bound,” or restricted. This is more or less the conception of binding Freud employs right up to *Beyond*, when he suddenly seems to want to rework it.

There, recall, Freud has to try to understand “instinctual” processes of repetition that seem to him to offer no possibility of pleasure (that is, what he has now begun to identify as certain instances of drive repetition that bring with them no pleasure at all). Having examined the psyche’s operations in the response to trauma, Freud ultimately posits the existence of an unconscious compulsion to repeat. But even when the hypothesis of the repetition compulsion is set aside, Freud realizes that the line of thinking he is pursuing requires that he alter the understanding of binding within this model. Thus, in chapter 7, at the very close of *Beyond*, Freud speculates, as he had several chapters earlier in his treatment of the war neuroses, that certain instances of repetition are to be understood as an effort on the part of the apparatus at binding—rendering less mobile and disturbing—excessive, traumatic influxes of excitation.

But in the process, the binding mechanism is subtly reconceptualized. Where before it was aligned with the secondary process, now Freud

suggests that perhaps, under certain conditions, it operates at the level of the primary process as well (since the form of repetition he is considering appears to him to be driven by an unconscious drive). In order to bring this thought in line with the existing notion of the pleasure principle, Freud hypothesizes that perhaps the binding mechanism, at this level, does not so much oppose the pleasure principle but, rather, actually contributes to its operations, insofar as binding, here, could serve as a “preparatory act” necessary for the ultimate discharge of excitation (18:76). Binding now appears as the first step on the overall path toward the reduction of tension, “a preliminary function designed to prepare the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge” (18:76).

Ultimately, Freud does not significantly alter his understanding of the primary and secondary processes, but he does recognize that in this new model the nature of the difference between the two processes remains somewhat obscure. Thus, at one point he suggests that the difference between them perhaps lies alternately in the fact that feelings of pleasure or unpleasure arising out of the primary process are more intense than in the secondary process, just as they were at the beginning of mental life, before the secondary process was in full effect (18:76). The pleasure principle would never have been able to establish its dominance if it had not already been at work at this early stage, however, he surmises, and thus he is left with what Strachey translates as “no very simple conclusion” (18:76). The implication is that “at the beginning . . . the struggle for pleasure was far more intense than later but not so unrestricted” (18:76). On this view, pleasure would have to have been originally restricted, not so free as later on, and this in fact forms the very condition of its emergence.

Freud does not seem to grasp the broader consequences—he does not, to my knowledge, ever return to this problematic in any depth and never clarifies what exactly he is describing here. But the point I want to make is that Freud arrives here at a new conception of the economy of pleasure, one that asks us to wrestle with a kind of *aporia*. According to his own logic, the pursuit of pleasure, in accordance with the principle that bears its name, can only get under way, or operate, by first limiting pleasure, its overall quantity if not its intensity.

The fullest, unleashed force of feelings of pleasure has to be foreclosed, and thus pleasure has to be to some extent restricted, in order for it to then be pursued and experienced. The psychic apparatus, here, has to disallow the experience of pleasure in its fullest expression in order for there to be any possible experience of pleasure. It has to turn back against its own basic aim—it has to turn back against itself—in order to fulfill its own most proper

function. The economy of pleasure glimpsed without being fully thought through in Freud thus works by the apparatus turning back on itself. The pursuit of pleasure, the fundamental operation of the psyche, is in effect originally interrupted, undermined to a certain degree, from within.

It is this thought of an entity turning back on itself and its own capacities, automatically, as it were, that matters most here. At the most general level, the thought of pleasure found on the edges of Freud's thinking suggests how an experience of pleasure only takes place on the basis of the internal division and nonselfsameness of the embodied "subject" of pleasure. Only a divided subject or "soul," to use the term Foucault preferred, can be capable of turning back on itself in this way.

To return to the theme of power, this is crucial insofar as power only takes charge of the body, and produces some subject of desire, if it lends that subject some relative coherence. This coherence is never formed once and for all and is always undergoing change, to be sure, if for no other reason than there are multiple force relations and techniques of subject formation operating on it at any given time. What Penelope Deutscher (2017, 24) in her recent book identifies as the "plasticity" of modes and techniques of power in Foucault—whereby diverse segments and technologies of power are seen to at times reinforce each other and at other times interrupt one another—speaks directly to this fact. Yet a certain relative coherence and stability is necessary on Foucault's view nonetheless. It is precisely the various ossified forms of identity associated with it, recall, that McWhorter and Sawicki argue Foucault wants to disrupt in calling for new practices of pleasure, even as he also allows us to see the ways power can take hold of pleasure.

With the conception of pleasure glimpsed in Freud, we get a deeper sense of how this is possible. On this view, pleasure is the site where the relative coherence of the body and the subject is rendered most problematic, where it is at its most unstable. Thus, however much the experience of pleasure serves as an insertion point for power, it will equally be that place where the subject formed within networks of power trembles and withdraws, as it were. Pleasure, here, gives rise to resistance in the sense that it names one place where biopower and the regime of sexuality necessarily falter, no longer operate. Resistance emerges in the destabilization effected on the subject of power in the very experience of pleasure. Crucially, the thinking of pleasure in Freud offers key resources to the Foucauldian project that stand to some extent apart from the notions of desire and drive Foucault saw as all too compatible with the regime of sexuality and the hermeneutics of desire.

Viewed from a certain Freudian standpoint, then, pleasure would form a key site *both* where power operates *and* where it reaches its limit. We thus begin to think the equivocation Foucault himself sees at play in pleasure, the one whereby pleasure reinforces the operations of normalizing power, even as, at other times, it works against them. The more profound differences between my approach and Foucault's would perhaps emerge once we begin to think through the implications of the logic we have seen traced in Freud. To be sure, pleasure, within the Freudian perspective I have sought to flesh out here, could not serve as a rallying point in the counterattack on sexuality in the way Foucault envisioned it. The theoretical approach I am advocating for in some sense disallows this possibility, insofar as the form of resistance that emerges within this framework arises in processes that happen, more or less automatically, all the time. This makes pleasure far less amenable to adoption for strategic counterattack. Yet it also proliferates those places where power reaches its limit, where it is rendered inoperative, despite itself, so to speak. The point, then, would be to bring these places and processes forward, showing how they form the condition of possibility of resistance to those prevailing regimes and technologies of power that, we will have learned from Foucault, not only shape our present but actively produce us as bodies and subjects of power.

NOTES

1. The notion of a "formative matrix" referenced in this passage, the matrix in which we are formed yet dispossessed of an essence at the same time, seems to me a more developed notion of what Foucault had previously called "the cultural unconscious" (1971, 198). This matrix is thus described in terms of "the implicit systems in which we find ourselves prisoners . . . the system of limits and exclusion which we practice without knowing it" (Foucault 1980, 186).

2. Works in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Freud 1953–74) are cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page number.

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