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## **Pornography and power in Michel Foucault's thought**

*Bohdana Kurylo*

### **Abstract**

*This paper reconstructs Michel Foucault's account of pornography by placing it into his theory of power. To explain the novelty of Foucault's position, it counterpoises it with anti-pornography feminism and its analysis of the modern state. The paper argues that Foucault considered pornography to be a strategy of biopower to regulate the individual sexual conduct. By inciting the discourse on sex, pornography participates in the production of truth about sex. Through confession, its consumers discover their sexual identities, becoming self-regulating. The result is a proliferation of sexualities, but also their rigidification and categorisation, leading to a mass deployment of perversion.*

**Keywords:** Pornography, power, Michel Foucault, sexuality, radical feminism.

### **1. Introduction**

In the Western world, there have been various representations of the human body. In the ancient Greek art, the idea that the body embodied moral and physical beauty was mirrored in the abundance of sculptured depictions. Akin to a sinful 'animal', the lustful body entered into antagonism with spirituality with the rise of Christianity. In turn, in the late 1960s, the coming of liberalisation ushered in explicitly sexualised bodily portrayals, at the centre of which stood pornography. The spirit of the 'sexual revolution' was short-lived, as the rise of radical feminism clothed the female body with a new meaning – a sexualised object for male sexual consumption. Invoking the original meaning of pornography as 'the graphic depiction of the lowest whores', American radical feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin argued that the erotisation of women's submission in pornography is vital for maintaining male dominance in the modern state (Dworkin 1981, 200). Meanwhile, in France, an alternative account of the relationship between sexuality and power was developed by the political historian and genealogist Michel Foucault.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the place of pornography in Foucault's theory of power. Whereas anti-pornography feminism has received a lot of scholarly attention, Foucault has remained underrepresented in the political debates on pornography. In order to show the novelty of Foucault's approach, the paper will first examine the theory of pornography advanced by MacKinnon and Dworkin and its relation to their critique of the liberal state. Counterweighting their focus on the state as the locus of control, the paper proceeds by analysing Foucault's account of the changing character of power in the modern state. The article culminates into an attempt to reconstruct Foucault's ideas on pornography. It shows that Foucault not only spoke about pornography but also considered it to be a substantial mechanism for controlling sexuality since the transformation of power strategies in the 1960s.

Particular attention is given to Foucault's statements on pornography from the introductory volume of his interviews and the three-volume study, *The History of Sexuality*. The article demonstrates that the belief that pornography is a 'natural' drive is integral to making individuals self-policing. Being a strategy of biopower, it allows power to establish its control at the level of pleasure and guide the individual sexual conduct. Moreover, through confession to pornography, individuals unconsciously authorise it to reveal the truth about their sexual identities. Consequently, this causes a multiplication of sexualities, but also the establishment of the categories of 'normality' and 'deviancy', based on which perverse sexualities are constructed. In the end, the paper shows that Foucault significantly challenged the idea of state legislation to prohibit pornography. In fact, due to the productive capacity of power, banning pornography would have a reverse effect of intensifying the interest in pornography.

## 2. Pornography and the state in the theory of MacKinnon and Dworkin

In *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, MacKinnon (1989, 195) defined pornography as 'an industry that mass produces sexual intrusion on, access to, possession and use of women by and for men for profit'. A degrading presentation of women as 'sexual objects who enjoy pain and humiliation', rape, sexual submission and penetration by different objects sexualises intimate and psychic intrusion and lowers their social status (Dworkin 2000a, 29). According to Dworkin (2000b), there are four components that cause the oppression of women, all being present in pornography. First, pornography maintains the sexual *hierarchy* through entrenching the dominant position of men during the sexual conduct. Second, pornography depersonalises and dehumanises women, causing their *objectification*. In the condition of hierarchy and subordination, *submission* is necessary for women to survive, which further entrenches their inferiority. Consequently, systematic sexual *violence* transforms into an acceptable phenomenon, seen as something that women desire by their sexual nature. Pornography is, therefore, a violation of women's civil rights.

On the one hand, MacKinnon and Dworkin condemned the representation of women in a degrading manner in non-violent pornography, which 'conditions, trains, educates and inspires men to despise women' (Ibid., 42). On the other hand, strong attention was given to a causal link between pornography and sexual violence. MacKinnon (1997, 5-6) gave examples of multiple cases when men forced sexual access into their girlfriends/wives immediately after watching pornography. Many women were also gang-raped while being compelled to assume pornographic poses (Ibid.). Her conclusion was that pornography promotes culture characterised by 'the effectively unrestrained and systematic sexual aggression of one-half of the population against the other half' (MacKinnon 1989, 332). The installation of the fear of sexual violence was claimed to be a wider project to perpetuate male dominance. As the anti-pornography activist Robin Morgan (1980, 139) concluded, 'pornography is the theory; rape is the practice'.

MacKinnon criticised the liberal and socialist strands of feminism for not recognising that the system of gender hierarchy is the basis of the modern state. The Marxist theory adopted by feminism is indistinguishable from liberalism, as they both fail to address the oppression in private sphere. One has to begin from specifically women's point of view. Based on her knowledge of 'the concrete conditions of all women as sex', MacKinnon (1983, 640) proceeded to create a 'feminist' theory of the patriarchal state. Above all, she viewed the state to be male, working to ensure men's control over the female body at every level of social existence. Realising that fighting for legal reform is futile, MacKinnon (1989, 221) argued that 'the male standard' is inherent to the liberal concept of neutrality that is used to defend male rights. The illusion of neutrality is possible because the state mirrors the inequality of social structures of the gendered reality. As a result, the force of male dominance is 'exercised as consent, its

authority as participation, its supremacy as the paradigm of order, its control as the definition of legitimacy’ (MacKinnon 1983, 639). Confronting the liberal principle of freedom of speech, MacKinnon maintained that the law of obscenity silences the already silent voices of women by assuming that women are equal to men in the society. In fact, being a human is defined as being a man. In the end, as long as the liberal state reflects the dominant view of the society, the state is seen as impartial.

The separation between public and private is paramount to the state self-legitimation, for their inseparability would expose the sexual inequality. Sexuality is viewed as a matter of privacy, which is a right to ‘an inviolable personality’ (Ibid., 659). The state pays attention mostly to the effects of pornography related to the moral cleanliness of the society, omitting what, according to MacKinnon (1989, 201), is considered to be key in aggravating the women’s status – ‘the eroticisation of dominance and submission’. In a similar fashion, the state encounters difficulties in distinguishing degradation from art, commercial exploitation from advertising, and rape from sex. The myth that MacKinnon wanted to debunk is that the state intends to repress pornography. Rather, the state is its ultimate protector. She claimed that the inferiority of women is a crucial prerequisite for the gender hierarchy, as it maintains the differences in self-worth between the two sexes. The pornographic portrayal of women as aroused by humiliation, pain and torture further reinforces the inferior status of women. Therefore, the measure of privacy is equal to the measure of women’s violation, for the oppression of women originates in the private sphere. Evading this factor allows the state to portray pornography as a problem of sex and morality, and not the oppression of women. In so doing, MacKinnon and Dworkin represented the radical feminist belief that pornography is not just imagery but the ‘core constitutive practice’ of the patriarchal state (Ibid., 198). It is the cause of sexual inequality ‘however located – in job, in education, in marriage, in *life*’ (Ibid.).

Nonetheless, the anti-pornography effort faced a lot of criticism. First, MacKinnon and Dworkin were challenged for the conflation of pornography and violence. MacKinnon (1993, 20) claimed that ‘all pornography is made under conditions of inequality based on sex, overwhelmingly by poor, desperate, homeless, pimped women who were sexually abused as children’. In response, social psychologist Edward Donnerstein accused her and Dworkin of misusing his studies to prove the link between the depictions of violence and men’s behaviour, stressing that his findings only showed the correlation between violent pornography and men’s attitudes (Duggan 2006). Others stated that rape is not an exclusive result of pornography because it depends on the individual predisposition towards sexual aggression (Ciclitira 2004). Taking a middle ground, some scholars concluded that, whereas the exposure to sexually violent imagery could lead to sexual violence, so-called ‘softer’ pornography does not cause such effects (Messe 1986; Duggan, 2006). The fact that violent pornography is only a small part of the pornographic industry also negates the logic of banning all pornography (Strossen 1995; Hald and Malamuth 2015).

A more formidable contradiction in the theory of MacKinnon and Dworkin concerns their intention to allow state policing of desire. To recall, MacKinnon and Dworkin pioneered the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance of 1984, endorsing government action against pornography. The ordinance would have allowed prosecution for coercion into pornography, its production and distribution (Dworkin 2000c, 154). However, the ordinance was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1986 on the grounds of abridging the freedom of expression under the First Amendment.

Their support for government intervention made MacKinnon and Dworkin extremely unpopular amongst many feminists. Some voiced their suspicions that the state was biased towards portraying pornography as a significant social problem to be regulated (Bates &

Donnerstein, 1990; Monk-Turner & Purcell, 1999). The fact that the anti-pornography campaign gained a lot of support from Christian fundamentalists and conservatives generated fears of a return to sexual repression. Feminist historians, such as Ellen DuBois and Linda Gordon (1984, 33) claim that, since the 1960s, there has been no increase in sexual violence. However, historically, women have always suffered from the strengthening of state powers (Duggan 2006). One of the leading 'pro-sex' feminists Ellen Willis (1985, 158) also feared that the anti-pornography campaign could become a 'moral crusade' against women's right to free expression in the culture that has already viewed sex as a 'forbidden, secretive pleasure'. Consequently, the anti-pornography campaign shortly became notorious, questioning the validity of the radical feminist theory of the state.

### **3. Foucault and the genealogy of power**

MacKinnon and Dworkin believed that pornography was the key to understanding the modern patriarchal state. However, does the idea of patriarchy offer a holistic explanation of modern power relations, or are they more complex? Michel Foucault was by no means a feminist, but many feminists have tried to incorporate his theory of power into feminism. Foucault's analysis of power in the modern state is foundational to his ideas on pornography and needs to be explored first.

Challenging the radical feminist analysis of patriarchal monopoly of power, Foucault maintained that power does not emanate from a single overarching origin. Rather than being oppressive, sovereign or conspiratorial, power is a dynamical network of relations prone to adopting certain historical appearances. One needs to think 'of its capillary forms of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and inserts itself into their very actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes, and everyday lives' (Foucault 1980, 39). Although the dominance of certain groups is possible, power does not have a centralised core, being dispersed throughout various 'processes, of different origins and scattered location[s]' (Foucault 1979, 138).

Foucault grounded his analysis on his observations of the historical transformations of power. In his lectures, *Security Territory, Population* (2009), he described the transition from the medieval state, which was based on the idea of sovereignty, to the administrative state of the fifteenth century, which started deriving its strength from disciplining the individual body. Disciplinary power places individual conduct under its permanent surveillance. It is exercised directly on the body, making it useful, 'docile' and submissive. In other words, the body became an inscription of power relations. Starting from the sixteenth century, the disciplinary control over the individual body has been reinforced by the management of 'life' involving the whole population. The combination of both forms of power constitutes the notion of 'biopower', which is the modern form of power that aims to 'invest life through and through' (Foucault 1978, 139). As such, the administration of population is ensured on the individual and social levels.

Discussing biopower, Foucault emphasised on the political significance of sexuality, which signifies a notable point of convergence with radical feminism. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he argued that the deployment of power from the outset appears at the level of the body, namely in the individual reproductive conduct. Foucault (Ibid., 26; 146) explained it by saying that '[t]he manner in which each individual [makes] use of his sex' is pivotal for controlling the body both for 'the life of the body and the life of the species'. More importantly, Foucault reversed the conventional understanding of 'sex' as a natural category that gives rise to 'sexuality'. Instead, he viewed 'sexuality' as the 'real historical formation [...] [which] gave rise to the notion of sex' (Ibid., 156). Similar to feminism, Foucault stated

that sexuality is not ‘a natural given which power tries to hold in check’ (Ibid., 105). *Vice versa*, it is ‘a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances’ are strategically united to perpetuate power (Ibid., 106). As such, ‘sex’ is created to give an artificial unity to previously scattered biological elements, pleasures and conducts. Therefore, sex and power are symbiotic.

In contrast to MacKinnon and Dworkin, Foucault was critical of overplaying the constitutive role of the institution of the state as the centre of power. It is not to say that he considered the state to be irrelevant in the modern society. Indeed, he claimed that ‘the problem of bringing under State control, of “statification” (*étatisation*) is at the heart of’ his work (Ibid., 77). The point is that, to understand the modern mechanisms of power, it is not enough to look at the institutions that are merely a by-product of larger processes taking place within the society. Unlike previous models of the state power (whether it be a liberal juridico-political institution, Weberian self-sustaining actor with a monopoly of legitimate violence, or a Marxist instrument of dominant class rule), the state apparatus is theorised as merely a terminal effect of crystallisations of power relations. As Foucault (2010, 91) claimed, the state is ‘the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities’ that render its functioning possible. Its form is contingent on and gains its consistency through generalisable mechanisms of power. Finally, the state can only function through power. As Gilles Deleuze (2006, 63) explains, ‘there is no state, only state control’, which derives from the integration of power relations. While power relations are not dependent on the state, they, nonetheless, maximise its effectiveness. Therefore, Foucault suggested looking first at the technologies that allow power to penetrate the society from within and only then on how their codification is reflected in the decisions of the state apparatus.

Moreover, Foucault’s interest turned to a new concept of ‘governmentality’ understood as a ‘governmental rationality’. According to Foucault’s findings presented in his lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, starting from the eighteenth century, governmentality has entered a new phase of neoliberalism. The change has brought a new type of individual and social regulation that functions through making people self-regulating, with a minimal intervention of the state (Foucault 1984). Like MacKinnon and Dworkin, Foucault highlighted the role of the separation between private and public, yet his concept of the private starkly differs. For Foucault, the individualisation that appears in the private realm is meant to give an impression of freedom from regulation but is a very specific form of regulation. Neoliberal governmentality encourages the production of autonomous, self-policing individuals who act according to the interests of the government. Foucault’s critique demonstrates that the content of the private, which is seen as a space outside state interventions, is already determined by state regulation. In the indirect management of population, freedom and self-discipline become intrinsically connected.

Simultaneously, Foucault began depicting power as presupposing rather than annulling individual agency, which is a noticeable shift from its omnipotent and omnipresent nature in *Discipline and Punish*. The problem is that, under the pretence of personal autonomy, the government of individualisation is fundamentally normalising. Accordingly, ‘an inspecting gaze’ is internalised by the individual bodies, who become their own ‘overseer’ and exercise ‘surveillance over, and against [themselves]’ (Foucault 1980, 155). As David Garland (cited in Lukes 2005, 138) explained, ‘power operates “through” individuals rather than “against” them and helps constitute the individual who is at the same time its vehicle’. In short, individuals are ‘in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power’ (Foucault 1980, 98).

#### 4. Rubin, Butler and Foucauldian feminist reflections on pornography

Michel Foucault is not a prominent figure in the feminist debates on pornography. Notably, as Foucault's writings gained fame only in the 1980s, many anti-pornography feminists, including MacKinnon (2000, 687), were not aware of Foucault during the anti-pornography campaign. Many feminists have also been strong critics of Foucault's analysis of power relations, in which he overlooked that, whereas sex is structured by sexuality, the latter itself is structured by gender (Fraser 1989; Lauretis 1987). They also criticised Foucault's disregard for the empowering capacities of law. Lois McNay (1992, 45) claimed that legal achievements, such as female suffrage and abortion rights, should not be dismissed merely as another form of control. Nonetheless, some feminists inspired by Foucault's analysis of power found it useful for thinking about pornography. It is worth briefly examining some examples of feminists' elaborations of Foucault's ideas in their reflections on pornography to see the inconsistencies left in their accounts.

Building on Foucault's ideas on the role of normalisation in shaping sexuality, feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin argued against state legislation on any sexuality-related matters. She said that the modern society assesses sex according to 'a hierarchical system of sexual value' and depicted the state as the adamant enforcer of 'the barbarity of sexual persecution' (Rubin 1991, 149-151). Its goal is conformity to a single standard of sexuality that equates to, according to Rubin's formulation, 'the placement of the penis in the vagina in wedlock (Ibid., 159). She represented the early wave of Foucauldian feminism that was mainly interested in the 'grip' power has over the body, incorporating the concepts of 'discipline' and 'normalisation' into feminism.

Another famous representative of Foucauldian feminism is gender theorist Judith Butler, whose account of 'gender performativity' was significantly influenced by Foucault. She maintained that gender is the 'cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established [...] prior to culture' (Butler 1999, 7). Furthermore, in her thesis, *Excitable Speech: The Politics of the Performance* (1997), she refuted the idea that pornography has the power to reproduce the fantasy it generates in reality, for the relationship between speech and conduct is more complex. She criticised MacKinnon and Dworkin for vilifying male sexuality and assuming the existence of pre-social sexual identities. The validity of her criticism is illustrated by the feminists' claims that the consumption of an accessible eroticised object was part of male sexuality (MacKinnon 1989, 199), and that male dominance 'authentically originate[d] in the penis' (Dworkin 1981, 24). According to Butler, in the absence of a universal female identity, fighting the oppression of women through legal representation would only facilitate the 'myth of a woman'.

The positions of both Rubin and Butler are similar to pro-sex feminism, as both argued that state censorship oppresses sexual minorities and prevents the diversification of sexualities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go deep into comparing the positions on pornography of Foucauldian feminism and Foucault. Rather, the paper attempts to reconstruct the place of pornography within a larger framework of his theory of power and the mechanisms that help incorporate it into civil society. In fact, Foucault (cited in Bray 2011, 138) himself argued against child pornography legislation in France because it would result in a 'new regime for the supervision of sexuality'. Foucault's statement could be generalised to fit the belief that pornography is a prerequisite for sexual diversity. However, as the next section shows, such generalisation does not fully capture Foucault's perspective.

## 5. Pornography: the austere queen of sexography

During his interview, 'Body/Power', Foucault (1980, 56) was asked about his opinion on the idea of 'recuperation' through pornography prevalent since 1968. In response, Foucault (Ibid.) said that he completely disagreed with it, for it is 'the usual strategic development of a struggle'. Indeed, Foucault was a vigorous critic of the sexual liberation movements. Returning to his analysis of the historical dynamics of power, he stressed the ineffectiveness of disciplinary power in its purely interdictory form, with its "heavy, ponderous, meticulous and constant" investment of the body (Ibid., 58). Accordingly, the emergent surveillance of sexuality in the eighteenth century was followed by a reverse effect from the side of its subjects. The body revolted, as the desire for sex was intensified. That which was forbidden, became created. Repression and the constitution of sexualities went hand in hand. However, it did not stop power from transforming its technologies, as control of sexuality has taken a new shape in the neoliberal era of governmentality. Beginning from the late 1960s, rather than retreating to repression, power has intensified with a new strategy of controlling the sexual body through the stimulation of desire (Ibid., 57). Having realised that prohibition only strengthens desire for the prohibited, power has started operating through forming desires. Consequently, the sexual desire further feeds into this constitutive dimension of power.

Foucault's reply clarified three things. First, both 'the repressive hypothesis' and pure discipline could no longer explain the relationship between power and pornography. This shows the insufficiency of Rubin's elaboration of Foucault that does not account for the productive nature of the modern governmental practices. Second, it hints that pornography is a significant element in the 'polymorphous techniques of power' permeating right into the realm of desire (Foucault 1978, 11). Lastly, Foucault's statement explains why pornography was not given central attention in *HS*, Foucault's major study of sexuality and power. As such, the issues of pornography and sexual liberation gained momentum in the late 1960s, whereas the intention of the book was 'a history of the problematisation of [sexual] behaviours' from the seventeenth until early twentieth century (Foucault 1989, 369).

Nevertheless, *HS* is crucial for understanding the transformations of power technologies that led to the surge of pornography. In the book, Foucault (1978, 34) observed the development of 'a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse' on sex. Contrary to being a collective curiosity swapping across the West, it is likely to be one of the strategies of biopower. Importantly, the maximisation of state control is no longer done from a centralised apparatus since people themselves have turned into 'police' (Ibid., 25). The rising 'will to knowledge' – 'the injunction to know [sex], to reveal its law and its power' – is the primary instrument, through which power penetrates inside the sexual lives of its subjects (Ibid., 157). It is 'an entire painstaking review of the sexual act in its very unfolding' that interests it (Ibid., 19). The emanation of discourses is dispersed and its forms are diversified. In this process, there has appeared a 'wide dispersion of devices [...] invented for speaking about [sex], for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself' (Ibid., 34) Since the 1960s, pornography has been one of the major microphysical 'Panoptisms' that surveils the population. It is a major device 'for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing' sex and inciting the will to 'knowledge of pleasure' (Ibid.). The new governmental strategy has been embedded in the law, which simulates a movement towards de-repression by legalising pornographic imagery. In reality, through the continuous incitement to voyeurism, pornography allows power to penetrate into 'the rare and scarcely perceivable forms of desire' (Ibid., 11).

A year after the release of *HS*, in his interview 'The End of the Monarchy of Sex,' Foucault argued that, together with the incitement to the discourse of sex, pornography is also



part of the modern system of production of truth. He referred to pornography as the modern ‘sexographic writing’ that sustains ‘the monarchy of sex’ (Foucault, 1989, 219). It is pornography – the queen of sexography – that makes humans want to ‘decipher sex as the universal secret’ (Ibid., 218). The idea closely corresponds to the statement Foucault (1978, 159) made about the ‘austere monarchy of sex’ in *HS*, which sustains ‘the endless task of forcing [the] secret [of sex], of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow’. Accordingly, starting from the seventeenth century, sexuality has begun to be viewed as ‘a field of meanings to decipher’ (Ibid., 68). Uncovering that truth became key for making sense of the individual body and identity in the modern society. Seen as ‘the deepest corners of the self,’ as Laura Kipnis (2006, 118) characterised it, both sex and pornography are associated with the realisation of natural sexual drives. For example, according to the American pornographic actor Scott O’Hara (2009, 83), people are ‘born with the inherent desire for porn,’ for ‘watching other people have sex [...] is an essential human pleasure’. Hence, contrary to being repressive, modern power operates through inciting people to speak about sex, exploiting the widespread belief that the desire for pornography is natural and capable of revealing individual truths.

## 6. Extracting, proliferating, implanting

In *HS*, Foucault made a single, but substantial statement that reveals the precise mechanism that makes pornography a transfer point between its consumers and power. According to him, ‘a proliferation of sexualities through the extension of power [...], with the help of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution and pornography, [...] tapped into both this analytic multiplication of pleasure and this optimisation of the power that control[ed] it’ (Foucault 1978, 48). The positioning of pornography along with medicine and psychiatry means that it is a part of the disciplinary technologies that function through confession. In turn, confession is at the centre of the new procedure for producing the truth of sex – *scientia sexualis*. According to *scientia sexualis*, the truth of sex is innately set in the psyche and could be discovered by looking at individual desires. The confessional practice is not limited to speaking about sex but requires ‘reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, the desires, modulations and quality of the pleasure that animated it’ (Ibid., 61).

Pornography as a form of confession is the underlying argument of the Foucauldian feminist analysis of pornography by American film scholar, Linda Williams. In her book, *Hard Core: Power Pleasure and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’*, Williams (1989, 50) argued the illusion of ‘the involuntary confession of bodily pleasure,’ namely on the side of the female performer, is the *raison d’être* of pornography. This confession is taken for truth by male viewers who install their gaze over the female pleasure. Nevertheless, as Chloë Taylor (2009, 35) noted, the spectators are much more interested in ‘a well-performed adherence to a standard pornographic script’ than in the sexual truths of female actresses. Furthermore, following the logic in which women are always-already the victim, Williams conceived of confession as a necessarily female attribute. Her belief that there must be a master behind the deed, in this case, men, led Williams to misinterpret Foucault. She clearly overlooked the idea that power does not belong to a particular group, but grows stronger the more dispersed it becomes.

Accounting for the dispersed nature of power shows that confession is likely to come not from the actors, but from the consumers – that microphysical realm of power. Indeed, in *scientia sexualis*, rather than being imposed from a centralised nucleus, sexual truths are extracted from below. Herewith, Foucault (1978, 61) stated that confession establishes a power relationship between the confessor and the listener, whether real or virtual. In the process, the listener, in this case, pornography, gains authority over the confessor and becomes empowered to judge and advise (Ibid., 62). By identifying what kind of pornography aroused them, the

viewers rely on pornography to tell them the singular truth about their sexuality; the truth that is but a product of power (Ibid., 60). This regime of truth production has brought an ever-stronger proliferation of different sexualities – homosexual, masturbator, exhibitionist, impotent, sadist, masochist, prostitute, etc. However counterintuitive this might be, but Foucault showed that through confession to pornography, both male and female viewers are actively, if unconsciously, constructing their sexuality. Following a differentiating logic of power, Foucault challenged cultural Marxist accounts of bourgeois sexuality as an illusion of ‘pseudo-individuality’ that causes homogenisation and social conformity (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, 145).<sup>1</sup>

The more important point concerns the idea that the proliferation of sexualities tapped into the ‘optimisation of the power’ (Foucault, 1978, 48). According to Foucault, to control perversion, modern Western societies need to discover and study it first, which they do through pornography as one of the key individualising practices. Pornography gives individuals the opportunity to discover a number of options in the form of self-examination. The received knowledge allows for a categorisation of individuals according to their sexual desires. In this way, individuals begin to identify themselves with a specific kind of sexuality, as Foucault (Ibid.) said, ‘polymorphous conducts were [...] extracted from people’s bodies [...], solidified in them, [...], drawn out, revealed, isolated, intensified, incorporated’. As a result of categorisation, ‘scattered sexualities [have] rigidified, [become] stuck to an age, a place, a type of practice,’ restraining individuals to a single sexuality (Ibid.). The difference between pornography and real sexual encounter is that the former gives individuals more control over the action than the latter (Taylor 2009). Pornography makes adhering to a particular practice a lot easier, which explains the continuous need to use it as a source of fantasy, even in the presence of a partner. In short, while pornography has helped sexualities to multiply in general, individuals have become fixed to a single sexual identity.

More importantly, the proliferation of sexualities is followed by their ‘perverse implantation’ (Foucault 1978, 48). The standards of ‘normality’ and ‘deviancy’ are created to encourage conformity to certain standards. The ‘abnormalities’ – those who do not match the monogamous, heterosexual norm – are portrayed as ‘polymorphism perversity’ (1989, 219). As Taylor (2009, 42) showed, most pornography viewers make a clear distinction between ‘their’ type of sexuality and others, as well as between ‘abnormality’ and ‘normality’. Herewith, it does not make a difference whether the imagery is heterosexual or homosexual since the very act of choosing what type of pornography to watch is at the core of implanting perversion. In the neoliberal era of governmentality, people do not even need to be outspoken about their preferences, as self-surveillance is the most productive form of control. It is enough for them to situate themselves either as ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’ to re-inscribe the ‘gold’ standard.

## **7. The interlocution**

The analysis has shown that Foucault’s ideas on pornography often brings him close to radical feminism. Like MacKinnon and Dworkin, Foucault was concerned with the effects of power in the microphysical realm of intimate experience. Both saw the political significance of sexuality as a vehicle of power. Talking about the achievements of radical feminism, Foucault (cited in Heyes 2013, 5) even commended it for departing ‘from the discourse conducted within the apparatuses of sexuality’. Moreover, while their liberal critics claimed pornography to represent diversity and freedom of expression, they tried to unmask power relations behind it, albeit understood in contrasting ways.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, followers of Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich view pornography as a distraction from the repressive nature of the bourgeois state; an antidote to genuine liberation.

In addition, both could complement each other's inadequacies. Deprived of the negativity present in radical feminism, Foucault's analysis showed that the productive side of power, which could be a guide rather than merely a coercive force. Accordingly, the innovation of neoliberalism rests in boosting the ability of power to affect individuals by placing limits on the authority of the state as an institution. Foucault could also remedy the elements of essentialism in the portrayal of men as the exclusive authors of the universal oppression of women through pornography, making it necessary to recognise the role of women in sustaining sexual inequality. Finally, he demonstrated that pornography does not need to be violent or heterosexual to perpetuate power, which could strengthen the feminist case against all forms of pornography. In turn, MacKinnon and Dworkin explained that, although men watch pornography more, the problem is especially dire for women who try to match the norms set by pornography, as well as their partners' interpretation of it.

The strongest difference between the two is their attitudes towards banning pornography. Foucault insisted: the state should not legislate on sexuality. Perhaps, contradicting to his statements that the real control is not exerted from the apparatus of the state, he, nonetheless, recognised that it still retains some power to implant perversion. As mentioned earlier, banning pornography would make sexuality 'a threat to all social relations' (Foucault 1988, 281) The legislation could also facilitate re-medicalisation of 'sex addiction,' which has already been in action since the legalisation of pornography (Voros 2009). Crucially, as power is productive, censorship would only reinforce the desirability of pornography, for 'prohibitions of the erotic are always at the same time, and despite themselves, the eroticisation of prohibition' (Butler 1990, 111). Speaking about the censorship of pornography is already part of the incitement to discourse (Bray 2011). After all, MacKinnon (1983, 644) herself admitted the futility of legal action, for the misogynist state would 'putatively prohibit pornography enough to maintain its desirability without making it unavailable or truly illegitimate'. In sum, the twofold character of power means that banning pornography would strengthen state control over the individual sexuality while simultaneously enhancing the demand for the imagery.

Foucault believed that the real change could be brought by a 'desexualisation'. By the term, he meant breaking from the agency of sex and desire and moving towards 'a general economy of pleasure' (Foucault 1989, 212). He called for seeing sexuality as an individual creation, and sex as a dimension of creativity and new forms of pleasures, relationships and emotions (Ibid., 382). The new era will begin with smashing the old meaning of 'sex' and 'sexuality,' and a move 'toward mentioning what [has been] most unmentionable in sex' (Ibid., 219). In such circumstances, why would somebody even need to rely on pornography for fantasy when everybody's perception of pleasure and sex are different? It is not to say that pornography will simply wither away once one realises the complex power workings behind it. Pornography is likely to morph into various appearances, the overarching feature of which will remain the intertwining between pleasure and power. Nor is pornography a purely detrimental phenomenon. Yet, it is certainly a contingent one, in a way opening new possibilities for interpreting pleasure.

## **8. Conclusion**

The peculiar interlocution between radical feminism and Michel Foucault reveals the extent to which power has 'wrapped the sexual body in its embrace' (Foucault 1978, 44). Even in feminist circles, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin stood out with their conviction that pornography is inherently harmful to women. Interpreting the state to be male, they confronted the liberal principles of neutrality and the separation between private and public. In response, they were challenged by their fellow feminists for intending to allow state control of

female sexuality while accusing it of sexism. After all, as Judith Butler argued, are the categories ‘men’ and ‘women’ a sustainable groundwork for thinking about social hierarchies?

Like MacKinnon and Dworkin, Foucault pointed at the insufficiency of liberal and Marxist explanations of the state but came at a drastically different account of power and the state. He suggested examining power from the institutions, arguing that it comes from everyone and everywhere. To understand the modern system of government, one needs to examine the operation of power first at the microphysical and then macrophysical levels. The result points to a general crystallisation of power technologies. After all, it is not the laws and policies of the state that matter, but rather the process of incorporating power and control into society through various modes of investment and power mechanisms.

This paper has shown that pornography has accompanied the changing strategies of power that, rather than just disciplining individuals, are constitutive of their desires. Foucault saw pornography as part of ‘the monarchy of sex’ that incites the discourse on sex, being the strategy of biopower to surveil the population. Pornography allows power to study the most tenuous aspects of the sexual lives of its subjects. It is not simply observing, but guiding towards specific ends that interests power. Its means is confession, whereby individuals confess to pornography, relying on it to understand to their sexual identities. The result is a proliferation of sexualities, but also their rigidification and optimisation of power that controls pleasure. Most importantly, there is no need for a direct state intervention, for everything is done by self-examining and self-regulating individuals. Pornography results in the implantation of perversion and establishment of categories of ‘normality’ and ‘deviancy’. People are unknowingly fed the ready-made perceptions of a fulfilling intercourse, healthy sexuality and an acceptable deviation from the norm. Therefore, Foucault (Ibid., 48) asserted that ‘the West has not been capable of inventing any new pleasures’. Instead, it has ‘defined new rules for the game of powers and pleasures. The frozen countenance of the perversions is a fixture of this game’ (Ibid.).

On a basic level, radical feminism and Foucault shared a similar understanding of the role of pornography in the modern state – entrenching power deeper into the private realm. However, whereas MacKinnon and Dworkin did not see another option but to ban pornography, Foucault showed that any attempts to forbid pornography would be counterproductive. As repression and constitution of sexualities are complimentary, state legislation could further intensify the very pleasure that is prohibited. In the end, Foucault did not offer any ‘right’ solutions, but rather called for the rethinking of the perception of pleasure as a realm free of power, leaving the question of what to do with pornography entirely open-ended.

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