Foucault and the Free Boy

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Abstract
Upon the first instalment of his influential series concerning the History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault set out to edit the story of sex which he saw unfolding around him during the sexual revolution in the second half of the twentieth century. In his revised version, the story appeared as one in which sex was not repressed by a collection of operative discourses but rather produced by them, with the pedagogization of child sexuality being one such mechanism. Indeed, it would not be until the second volume of his series that he would shift his study from the strict moral economy of a post-Victorian society to the pre-Christian world of Greco-Roman antiquity. The following is thus a pre-emptive analysis of the historical specificity of Foucault’s proposition concerning the perversification of the sexuality of children as it applies to various medical, legal and moral discourses of ancient Greece.

Upon his first work on the history of sexuality, Foucault told a story of sex that went as such: once upon a time there was a world in which the body and its behaviours were free. Sex was something candidly spoken of, openly advertised and performed with few reservations. Nevertheless the time would come when the sombre image of the Victorian prude would force all traces of such blatant sexuality from sight, implementing in its place a strict regime characterized by censorship, bodily etiquette and a common sense of social decency. Only now, in the aftermath of that imperial system of sexual repression, are the chains which for so long had contained the sexual individual being feverishly renounced (Foucault, 1978, p. 3-4). To Foucault however, the creation as well as the subsequent casting off of these supposed chains served only to encourage a series of hyper-sexualized discourses, in which the will to know more about sexuality led also to the will to create sexualities—most notably the perverse child. In the first volume of his three-book series, The History of Sexuality, Foucault explored the advent of child sexuality, among other non-marital sexual practices, as an operation of various loci of power.

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Thus he described the growing anxiety expressed by pedagogues and parents alike over the fleeting innocence of the bodies of children, which were perceived to be under constant threat from their own awakening curiosities and desires. The increasing concern over the premature development of the undeveloped, he argued, led to the obsessive segregation of space, a system of constant surveillance and a whole collection of corrective literature, all to protect against the creation and proliferation of the deviant child (Foucault, 1978, p. 28). This child, however, was theorized by Foucault within a very specific chronological frame, one dominated by Christian attitudes toward the body and pleasure.

Not until his second volume, in his exploration of the minds and bodies of the classical world, did he encounter a unique set of discourses which all pointed to a new kind of youth and an all together new concept of ‘sexuality.’ In view of an ancient world, one in which notions of sex and indeed of what constitutes a child have little semblance to their modern-day counterparts, it then becomes necessary to re-contextualize the study of child sexuality and examine the ways in which the ancients themselves approached the bodies of their youth. In this way, the following will serve to discuss the extent to which medical, legal and moral discourses from antiquity problematize child sexuality in line with Foucault’s theory of perversion as well as how the discourses diverge from it in their overarching objective. Here let there be no misunderstanding: the following does not aim simply to prove or disprove Foucault’s primary work on sex theory, but rather to use it, perhaps as he initially intended it to be used, as a particular hermeneutic to be applied against different discussions of sex and a different historical backdrop. It is, essentially, a discussion of fit. The object of the present analysis is then two-fold; for, it is a critical exercise which both seeks to explore and test the limits of Foucault’s theoretical work on infantile perversion in general, while at the same time using it to better
comprehend the classical treatment of the free boy in particular. Thus, by a process of first establishing the child as a subject, isolating the general solicitousness around the child and finally, identifying the associated discussions which such anxieties prompted, it will be shown that while the ancients fixated heavily on the bodies of their children, the undercurrent of such discussions was not of an overly-sexualized nature, but of a social one. Consequently, discourses surrounding child sexuality in its ancient form did not use the illusionary notion of repression to indulge in a greater examination of sexuality, as Foucault argued was the impetus behind the hysterics over the onanistic child of the nineteenth-century, but were rather concerned with the construction of the elite male gentleman.

To begin then, is to ask who this child, at the center of such anxious dialogue, is. For one cannot examine a fixed term, such as “child,” without first discussing its cultural specificity. To answer this at its most basic level, one must look to the ancient medical texts themselves, which systematically rendered what was understood to be youth and the nature of the child’s body. In the same way, Foucault distinctly described child sexuality as a matter of medicine, through which all forms of related pleasures were classified, incorporated into notions of development and thereby managed (1978, p.41). Unbothered by the need to use the same euphemistic speech as found in less technical sources, the writings of Hippocrates depict a medicalized portrait of the body in relation to sexual pleasure, in which pleasure was said to be felt as a result of the gentle friction that occurs between vessels when they become congested with sperm. It is in this construct of pleasure that the body of the child is differentiated, for he goes on to explain that “in the case of children their vessels are narrow and filled, and therefore prevent the passage of sperm, so that the irritation cannot occur as it does in the adult” (Hippocrates, trans. 1950, p.318). If the physical condition of children is one that disallows the experience of sexual
pleasure, as the text suggests, the Foucaudian image of the dangerous, sexually-charged youth is exchanged for an almost asexual being. The body of the child then goes on to be framed as passive in the pursuit of pleasure; a sexual role which is particularly emphasized within the elite practice of pederasty. Indeed, it is with the ability to delight in sexual activity that the body ceases to be considered a child, with the growth of hair on the boy’s chin being a sure indicator of this physiological change (Hippocrates, trans. 1950, p.332). Notable is the distinctly masculine orientation of the medical discourse, with the female form acknowledged, almost as a mere afterthought, as following the same pattern of development. With this, the child is brought into greater focus not as a subject of sexuality, but rather an object. Furthermore, he is a boy, cast center-stage into an elitist universe of bodies and pleasures. How then was this seemingly sexless child the focus of so much erotic solicitousness, and moreover, why?

When Foucault described the creation then condemnation of the perverted child, he wrote of a crusade by the adult world, combating any impure thought or activity considered to be outside the innocent boundaries of a child’s world, “like an epidemic that needed to be eradicated” (1978, p.42). To the modern mind the quintessential nightmare was thought to be the masturbating child, which then begs the question of how the freeborn boy, the precondition of the full-fledged Greek male citizen (with all the legal and social implications which such a status entailed), was pervesified and what techniques were used in doing so. For this, it is best to turn away from the medical works of the Hippocratic school to a more socially saturated discourse, in the form of a particular legal case involving the political prosecution of an Athenian citizen on the grounds of sexual misconduct.

In 346 BCE, Aeschines, a Greek statesman charged with treason for his participation in a pro-Macedonian faction in Athens, spoke in front of an Athenian jury in a successful retaliation
against one of his prosecutors and political adversaries, Timarchus. Aeschines’ speech took the form of an examination of Timarchus’ fitness to participate in public life, arguing that he was politically disqualified for having prostituted himself in his youth. While a clearly political agenda is evident, what is interesting is the sexual allegations around which the charge is based—illicit allegations tailored specifically to appeal to the already ingrained anxieties of his Athenian audience. Interestingly enough, his oration of illicitness starts with a story of the free boy. The first reflection of solicitousness is imagined through the eyes of the legendary lawgiver of Athens who, foreseeing the inherent temptation which the bodies of Athenian youths pose, implemented various devices of surveillance around them, much like the distressed adults of Foucault’s discussion. Aeschines goes on to urge that “it is plain that the lawgiver distrusts them; for he expressly prescribes, first, at what time of day the free-born boy is to go to the school-room; next, how many other boys may go there with him, and when he is to go home” (trans. 1919, p. 2:9). These surveillance devices, however, appear to be of a different nature than those in place to stop the onanism of the modern child, instead they seem to be in place to protect the passive body of the free-body from the desires of others. Indeed, in Aeschines’ rendition of Athens’ moral-legal code, much is said detailing the nature of the boys’ superiors, “father, brother, guardian, teachers, and in general those who have control of him,” over the boys themselves (p. 3:18). He goes on to explain the lawgiver’s appointment of the choregus, the man chosen to finance the chorus and other aspects of entertainment for the state, as necessarily “a man of more than forty years of age [...] in order that he may have reached the most temperate time of life before he comes into contact with your children” (p. 2:11). Furthermore, it would seem that the free boy was sexually corruptible only in the long-run since it was in adulthood, as a fully developed sexual individual and as a participating citizen, that he became reprehensible
for his bodily misconduct. Accordingly, Aeschines notes how “when a boy's natural disposition is subjected at the very outset to vicious training, the product of such wrong nurture will be [...] a citizen like this man Timarchus” (p. 2:11). The illicit character accused of Timarchus due to events of his boyhood was then product of the inadequate training given to him by another and his inability to fulfil the obligations required of a citizen as a result. This perceived impressionability and passivity of the free boy does not allow for the initiative and sexual self-awareness possessed by the modern child. Instead, he is problematized as an object of another’s sexuality, not the subject of his own.

Such bodily submissiveness, while acceptable in young age, could nevertheless become detrimental in years gone by if not given up. It was along these lines that Aeschines attempted to draw a portrait of illicitness which, beginning in Timarchus’ boyhood, was carried into the man. With the charge of prostitution, a collection of perversities can be drawn in terms of the free boy’s part within the elite games of love and sex. Passivity, then believed to be natural of a young male’s body, was acceptable only to the point of adulthood, when a boy becomes a citizen. To participate in the passive role after this transition was then analogous to that of a boy experiencing erotic pleasures, which in itself was unnatural, and so, perverted (Aeschines, trans. 1919, p. 13:94; see also Dover, 1978). Indeed, implicit in the case is the assertion that one need act according to their own age, much the same way the modern family obsesses over preserving the purity of their children. In fact, bodily misconduct as a whole seems to have been portrayed as a transgression particularly characteristic of childhood, with the implication being that an adult male should be in control of his physical self first and foremost if he is to be in control of anything else. “For,” Aeschines goes on, “to have sinned against one's own body is the act of a boy, but to have consumed one's patrimony is that of a man” (p. 13:94).
Moreover, throughout the ancient discourses, it is interesting to note that particular sexual acts are never specifically condemned, rather it is the improper context in which they are performed that was considered perverse. It is not then the fact that the child is masturbating which would irk the ancient mind, but rather the apparent inability of the child to moderate himself. This way, sexual activity is symptomatic of greater, more pressing issues surrounding the individual, which is expounded by Aeschines in his attempt to use Timarchus’ wanton past towards the defamation of his current character. Ultimately, the overarching conversation is not, as Foucault would have it, sexual at all, or at the very least, not one of sex for the sake of sex. If taken as a whole, one would see the charge of sexual illicitness as but one among countless other acts of hubris which Timarchus allegedly committed against himself, such as drunkenness and idleness, which Aeschines used to vilify him in front of the jury (p. 4-5:26). In the Greek world, the body of the child was not problematic solely because of its objectivity in a sexually-charged elite world, nor was there ever the Christian concept of a pure body readily tainted by impure thoughts (Foucault, 1978, p. 19-20). Instead, the implications surrounding a passive body were feared because of what the child turns into, that is, an Athenian male citizen.

It is here where the line is drawn between the modern and classic mind, for where one creates perverts in order to talk about sex, the other creates characters such as Timarchus in order to talk about citizenship. The importance warranted to the body of the freeborn boy is in anticipation to the kind of citizen he will become. Returning once again to Aeschines’ lawgiver, where it is said that “the boy who has been well brought up will be a useful citizen when he becomes a man,” it is notable that within this elitist myth of the well-bred, moderate citizen, the boy himself is invisible; his mindset is overlooked in favour of an uncomplicated psychic portrait (trans. 1919, p. 2:11). He is not a guilty, depraved mind, but a passive citizen-in-the-making.
Moreover, the surrounding discussions of the body are not limited to sex, but encourage debates over the recipe of an ideal. The philosophic writings of Plato most clearly reflect this use of the free boy’s body as a launching pad for more rounded discussions of virtue. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato’s Socrates puts forth the notion that bodily desire is the first step to a higher love of moral and intellectual excellence (Plato, trans. 1925, p. 18). Sexual conduct is but a small piece within a series of associations composing the body and mind of the Greek gentleman. In this way, classical perversion was not conceptualized in a solely sexual form, but in a broader sense of ills committed against the body; in which an unruly appetite was every bit as degenerate as mislead sexual conduct. Thus, for the ancient mind, perversion of the free-boy’s body came in the form of the anti-citizen, much in the same way that curiosity of the modern child was feared to be the first step into an imagined world full of sadists and pedophiles. Ultimately, the bodies of these two children, modern and ancient, spurred discourses with similar means but inherently dissimilar ends. For, whereas Foucault was able to look back at the past three centuries and describe a whole story of sex, it is doubtful whether sex would have occupied more than a chapter in the story told by the Greeks.

Thus, in his thoughts, Foucault was both product of his time and light-years ahead. While the body of the ancient child was defined, problematized and discussed in a manner altogether different from Foucault’s suspicion of a sex-crazed public operating under the illusion of repression, his mode of analysis opens up new avenues of study for the classist. What is revealed are the many ways in which the dominant discourses of the time used talk of the body as a social marker for what was deemed important; that is, in the case of ancient Greek texts, what was considered important to the closed ranks of a privileged few. Indeed, one must be ever mindful of the representativeness of Plato and Aeschines alike; for it was within their capacity as elites to
position themselves as the ones to prescribe the norm, hence the solicitousness around the free boy. In the end, when it comes to comparing the ancient and modern youth, along with the encompassing anxieties which they provoked, a whole new vocabulary needs to be supplemented. *Sexuality* must be understood more broadly as the various exercises of pleasure, *perversion* as a matter of misdirected behaviour, and finally *boy* in terms of the man he is to become.
References


