

Review of Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

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When writing, sometimes the hardest thing is the beginning, and that is a problem I face writing a review of Lynne Huffer's book, *Mad for Foucault*. Quite simply I want to lavish it with praise, but it is probably not good to start out that way. What could I possibly say, then, at the end? But praise it I must. I believe this is probably the most important work, written in English at least, addressing queer theory for a very long time. It deserves to be read widely not only by people working in the fields of queer theory and LGBT studies but also by feminist theorists and those working in gender studies more generally. As the sub-title indicates, Huffer is rethinking the foundations of queer theory, foundations which lie both in Foucault and feminist thought, though they are often assumed to be, if not in opposition, at least in some sort of disharmony. Huffer shows how much of that supposed disharmony might actually be based on false assumptions on all sides. Furthermore, Huffer's might be one of the best explorations of Foucault as theorist and (anti-)philosopher. She confesses to reading Foucault "with love" (p. ix), a love awoken, aroused by her encounter with the Foucault of the archives in 2006. Reading with love means that she also writes with love rendered in a delightful prose.

The book's scholarly Introduction and five chapters are interwoven with four personal Interludes and a concluding Postlude, which provide ruptures tracing a more "'personal' story about Foucault and *Madness* that ... constitutes an important part of the discursive fabric of my engagement with Foucault" (p. 16). The *Madness* here refers to Foucault's magisterial *History of Madness* published in 1961, a work still largely unknown in the realms of queer theory, despite the fact that it "constitutes an analysis of sexuality a full fifteen years before the publication" of the *Introduction* to the *History of Sexuality* series, which would be pivotal for the emergence of queer theory another fifteen years later. Didier Eribon, as Huffer acknowledges, made the same observation about *Madness* in his own *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (2004). Huffer's *Mad for Foucault* is a call especially to queer theorists in the United States—but also feminist theorists, presumably in the US too—to read *Madness*, only fully translated into English in 2006, because its absence has meant that queer theory has been based on "repeated misreadings of Foucault" (p. 68).

Huffer advances an important thesis: queer theorists who restrict their reading of Foucault to his *History of Sexuality*, even if supplemented by *Discipline and Punish*, are severely limited in their understanding of Foucault. Huffer goes as far as saying that you can't really grasp *History of Sexuality* without also reading *History of Madness*, that the two complement each other, with *Sexuality* standing almost in continuity with *Madness*. She argues that *Sexuality* should even—only?—be read through the lens of *Madness* to be understandable. The problem has been, though, that for those who don't read French, an English translation of the whole text was not published until 2006. The 1965 translation, *Madness and Civilisation*, was a much truncated edition which omitted important content from the original work.

In tandem with her thesis, Huffer also provides a critique of queer theory especially as practiced in the US (she seems to be writing with a primarily US audience in mind). Most importantly, she strongly critiques the "straight" reading by queer theorists of *Introduction's* famous passage about the 1870 invention of homosexuality by doctors and sexologists, a passage she describes as clearly ironic especially when read in the French. She provides both the French and her own translation with the standard English translation to highlight the ironic dimension of Foucault's words. She goes

further and says queer theorists in the United States have seriously misread it by reading it as a statement of origins or aetiology of homosexual identity. It is nothing of the sort, she declares, indeed Foucault “refuses to posit an origin of anything” (p. 75), a fact made most clear by reading *Madness*. She goes further saying that to “read the date 1870 as other than ironic is to buy into the psychological, psychiatric, and medical authority Foucault goes to great pains to dismantle” (ibid.). In other words, queer theorists mangled Foucault in the press of US identity politics and obsessions.

I was struck by Huffer’s repeated observation that, in *Madness*, Foucault describes—and laments?—the suppression of a homosexual lyricism in Europe during the Age of Reason, a suppression that happens alongside the Great Confinement, the rise of the asylum for imprisoning the “mad” and the “deviant.” And hence, says Huffer, sexuality and its manifold variations becomes the field for doctors, psychologists, therapists, and not historians, ethicists, philosophers, or theologians and biblical scholars for that matter.

Here I must intrude my own interlude to confess that I have read very little Foucault. I had read the *Introduction* to his *History of Sexuality*, at least in part, back in my undergraduate days in the early 1990s. At that time it had little context for me and I found a range of other authors that influenced me more. At the same time, here in Brisbane those were the years following decriminalisation and the first anti-discrimination law and a heady time for LGBT folks, especially folks like me who were active in community concerns and politics. At the University of Queensland, too, these were the first years of a queer space there, the Rona Room, the existence of which was really changing the dynamics of queer life on campus. Probably a much more important influence for me back then was Homocult and the activism around ACT UP and Queer Nation. What most appealed to me then was the stance of not regarding heterosexuality as the default—as one slogan went “heterosexuality is not normal, it’s just common”—and that led to looking for queer possibilities in anything, destabilising the heteronorm and opening a space for the queer and homosexual. That perspective still largely describes my scholarly framework on sexuality. I do not accept heterosexuality and its norms as the default or as something to aspire to.

As for Foucault, I also have a copy of the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, which I have attempted to read a number of times but have not finished because, like Huffer, I found it boring, not least because of its focus on elite males in ancient Greco-Roman society. Foucault did not inform my work on Sodom and Gomorrah much at all, although after now reading Huffer I can see how I might have been able to deploy him quite productively (but I don’t regret not doing so). More important for me back then was the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. She helped me to refine my reading position, my critical lens, and she is still an important intellectual influence for me. I do not recall Foucault as a dominant motif in her work, no matter how important he was for her theoretically. But periodically I’ve been rubbed up against Foucault by the way his *Introduction* to the *History of Sexuality* was being deployed in, to my way of thinking, quite uncritical ways. The crudest rendering of this Foucault deployment is the notion that homosexuality was invented as a category by sexologists and psychologists back in 1870 (or for some even later). This marked a new beginning and the creation of the homosexual identity as opposed to a time before when we can only speak of acts, certainly not identities let alone communities. As I heard one person say, citing Foucault, at a public forum about four years ago, there is no continuity with that time before the “invention” of the homosexual and our modern LGBT worlds.

When I was reading Didier Eribon in 2009, I was struck by the thought that maybe people hadn’t quite gotten Foucault. While Eribon gently critiqued the notion of the “invention” of the homosexual in 1870, he also highlighted how important Foucault’s *History of Madness* was to give more depth to the arguments in the *Introduction* to *Sexuality*. Eribon seemed to suggest that Foucault might have profited much more by drawing on his earlier work to illustrate the *Introduction*. After all, Eribon asked, how was it that sexuality, homosexuality, should be the subject (or object) of discussion and study/treatment by psychologists and therapists in the first place? So I

went back and re-read Foucault's *Introduction*. I hadn't gotten far before I realised that Foucault's project here was not "history" and certainly not homosexuality as such but much more about the discursive structures of social power. And when I re-read it, I was struck by the realisation that the famous passage about the homosexual being invented in 1870 was not about same-sex love and eros as such, or the people who lived it, their identities and communities. Foucault was not interested in identities and certainly not interested in aetiologies. I was struck by the thought that this was more a wry observation on the, one could say, vainglorious of knowledge powerbrokers. In the late 19th century in the field of sexuality these were the therapists, the doctors, the sexologists, who were above, outside of the realm of the deviant erotic just as the natural scientist was above, outside the realm from which specimens were collected and returned to the museums in the metropole for classification and study, or white male anthropologists might be above, outside the communities of "savages" they were studying (which savages might also have ended up in the museums of the metropole or parts of them anyway). And no wonder, then, that the term "homosexual" was resisted for so long by queer folks in the past as a term that was being imposed on them and not connected with their own experience. I could also not help but think that somehow Foucault's wry observation had been mis-taken by so many people in the areas of queer theory and sexuality. It always seemed to be cited as grim fact rather than grim joke. And this is one of Huffer's key points, too. Queer theorists have spectacularly misread, and thus failed to get, Foucault's wry wit. I must admit I was not only excited to have my impressions of this famous passage confirmed, but also that Huffer had provided both the French text and a detailed analysis of how it is pervaded by an irony whose traces must still lurk in the standard English translation for me to have picked up on them.

Huffer also reminds us that, first and foremost, Foucault is a philosopher, or better, an *anti*-philosopher. He wrote *Madness*, amongst other things, as a critique of Descartes, of the Cartesian separation of the mind/self and the body, in which madness is explicitly excluded from the Cartesian *cogito*; but more than just Descartes, *Madness* was also a critique of the Enlightenment and its heirs, especially Hegel. In *Sexuality* that critique is extended from Hegel to Freud, primarily in the *Introduction*. Nevertheless, Foucault writes philosophy with the use of the archives so his work is history-like. Crucially, Foucault is the heir of Nietzsche and seeks to abolish the subject so constructed by Descartes and developed by Hegel and the Enlightenment and later, too, by Freud and psychoanalysis. In all these projects of the internal metaphysical self, both madness and sexuality have been deployed for its construction, to demarcate its boundaries and essence, to keep it hovering above and untainted by the messy world of bodies and sex and madness (just as doctors, natural scientists and anthropologists remained outside and above the worlds of madness and perversion, the biosphere and the colonised cultures they studied). As the heir to Nietzsche, Foucault rejects such essentialism of the self. As Huffer puts it there is no inside to this outside, it is a false demarcation. In this context, it is no surprise to me that the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick began exploring Buddhism towards the end of her life. The Buddhist doctrine of anatta, no-self (as opposed to the Hindu/Vedanta concept of Atman/Self) bears a certain resonance with the Foucault-Nietzschean position. My understanding of Nietzsche is that he stood for an unmediated immediacy to life which again bears a resemblance to the Buddhist aim of living free of all attachment, including to the illusory "self."

But this brings me to my main critique of Huffer's book. Queer theorists might have misread Foucault's wit, and worse, uncritically elevated him to canonical authority, "gospel," but queer theory remains a heterogeneous and fluid project. Foucault might have authority but he is jumbled up with all manner of other intellectual streams. As Huffer points out, queer theory even tries to couple Freud with Foucault, which is a bit like coupling matter and anti-matter. Foucault stands opposed to Freud; Freud's gift, psychoanalysis, "endlessly performs and augments the Cartesian coup of the seventeenth century" (p. 160). In chapter 3, Huffer strongly critiques Judith Butler's *Psychic Life of Power* as one example of this coupling (while writing this review it was pointed out to

me that Butler's work has Hegelian roots, so perhaps Butler's coupling was a dialectical exercise bringing Foucault and Hegel together via Freud, or even integrating Foucault via Freud in a Hegelian schema?). But Huffer wants to make queer theory a more specifically—completely?—a Foucauldian project. She is herself “in love” with Foucault, so I can understand her zeal; she has “met” this Foucault “in the archives” and realised his breadth and depth in contrast to the cardboard cut-out of the standard queer theoretical perspective. I can understand her “love,” especially given the splits between much of queer theory and much of feminist theory (which she explores early in her book), in part based on that old misreading of Foucault and the fact that queer theory nowadays is, in my opinion, really kind of moribund and disconnected, having no real ethical grounding or political eros (to use Huffer's term). But I would prefer to keep the heterogeneity and fluidity of queer theory, which might in future be further fed by a specifically Foucauldian project, overlapping but neither separate nor totalising.

For those of us who don't want to work on a specifically Foucauldian project, Foucault might yet be a model. I like the way he works from, with, the archives. The philosopher writing history against philosophy, philosophy from the archives, Foucault blurs categories. What I have appreciated about queer theory has been that blurring, the lack of rigidity, the almost bower bird approach to thinking, and the commitment not to accept the heteronorm as given. But it has also remained caught in an identitarian morass (which perhaps helps serves interests of late capitalist society anyway). I have not been all that interested in identities, but rather with the way people have lived their same-sex love and desires, how they have dealt with the rejection, those cultures and discourses of insult and denigration that reinforce the heteronorm. I am also interested in the way those discourses work, and I look for ways to change all that, to maintain a critique that opens up different possibilities. I suspect the identitarian thing may be a displaced aetiology. One thing is for sure: I am not interested in origins or causes, or gay genes. They don't broaden our horizons or humanise us, let alone change our world.

My critique then is not really of the book as such. In fact, looking through my copy of *Mad for Foucault* I see that I have underlined on just about every page, reinforced my agreements with Huffer by exclamation marks and asterisks as well as occasional comments. It is a book well worth reading by anyone doing any sort of sexuality studies, especially if they are doing so under the umbrella of queer theory (likewise for those doing feminist and gender studies). I recommend this book to anyone interested in Foucault in any way at all. After reading Huffer there is only one more thing to do and that is to read *History of Madness*, the full version, itself. It might yet make me fall in love with Foucault, too, and become a fully fledged Foucauldian, and again it might not. But I'm looking forward to it, not least to catch a glimpse of that disappearing/suppressed homosexual lyric for which he mourned.

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