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## Review Essay

# Method to the madness: Reading Foucault between geometry and brackets

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### Foucault's Strange Eros

Lynne Huffer

Columbia University Press, New York, 2020, xii+265pp., ISBN: 978- 0-2311-9714-4

### The Elements of Foucault

Gregg Lambert

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2020, 143pp., ISBN: 978-1-5179-0877-5

It is a prolific and crucial age for Foucault studies, at a time when the name of the French author continues to be present not only in scholarly contributions but also in public debates. The publication, in early 2021, of the English translation of the fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*, *Les aveux de la chair* (*Confession of the Flesh*), has already sparked new academic endeavours in the study of Foucault's ongoing engagement with questions of subjectivity and sexuality and of his long-lasting interest in religion and early Christianity. Yet, such scholarly effervescence is balanced, if not counteracted, by the cropping up of Foucault's name in some less likely circles of political discourse, such as the UK former minister for women and equality Liz Truss' (2020) reference to Foucault in a speech where the French author is presented as the pioneering figure of a post-modernist philosophy that puts power structures ahead of individuals and where 'truth and morality are all relative'.

In such a time of diverse interest in Foucault, Gregg Lambert's *The Elements of Foucault* and Lynne Huffer's *Foucault Strange Eros* appear as two meaningful attempts to contribute to the ever-growing pile of 'tiny grains of sands' (Lambert, pp. 1–2) that constitute the commentary on the 'discourse of Foucault'.

It is hard to position either work within the prolific literature of Foucault studies. For it is clear that the more recent works produced in the field are trying to open up new trajectories in Foucault's *oeuvre*, offering an alternative to the main themes of discipline, biopolitics, and governmentality that have defined the author's legacy in the past decades. In addition to the aforementioned attention to the 'final Foucault'



of the 1976–1984 years, we can note Stuart Elden’s recent work on the early Foucault’s writing (2021). Huffer’s and Lambert’s books enter *in medias res* of this expansion: they offer not so much a stretching of the chronological or geographical boundaries of Foucault studies but work *within* Foucault’s conceptual universe with the aim of offering a novel organisation and composition.

The images of Michel Foucault that emerge from the two works could not be more different at first glance. Lambert is interested in Foucault’s analytic of power, whereas Huffer appeals to the inexplicable, fugitive force of an *ars erotica* that subtends Foucault’s genealogical method. And yet their divergences are productive and their accounts perhaps even complementary. Where Lambert tries to reconstruct Foucault’s work as a *more geometrico* that borrows from the methodological rigour of Descartes, Huffer’s question is directed towards what is ‘outside’ the sphere of intelligibility derived from the postulates of Foucault’s analysis of power and discourse. Huffer invites us to see Foucault not only as an intellectual and a thinker of power, but primarily as a poet, a Dante’s Virgil who can guide us in thinking the outside of the grid of intelligibility created by the *dispositif* of power, and particularly that of sexuality. If the plane of the *dispositif* is already ordered and, in fact, saturated by mechanisms of power, then the only move left is to push thinking towards what lies outside discursive mechanisms: a beyond that it is not arrived at conceptually and intellectually but non-philosophically, by the driving of the ethico-poetic force of a strange eros as a continuous practice of unbinding.

Let me unpack this claim. Huffer describes the intent of her book as ‘unleashing eros in its deinstitutionalised modes’ (p. 21)—a freeing and loosening move against disciplined experiences. Huffer’s work is the culmination of a trilogy which has engaged with Foucault’s analysis of sexuality and eros by privileging a less conventional trajectory of reading, which starts not with *History of Sexuality* but rather with *History of Madness*. This allows Huffer to distinguish eros from sexuality: ‘in modernity, we tend to conflate eros with sexuality. But Foucault’s eros ... is not sexual in any familiar sense. In Foucault, eros is to sexuality as unreason is to madness’ (pp. 2–3). It is important to clarify, then, that the strange eros that figures in the title of Huffer’s book has no essential sexual connotation. For Huffer, Foucault’s genealogical method is ‘erotic’ since it can ‘free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently’ (Foucault, 1985, p. 9).

Lambert’s book, by contrast, intervenes in the multiple ‘archaeological strata’ of scholarly commentaries on Foucault, and offers a different organisation of Foucault’s thought. Lambert reflects on the methodological reversal that grounds Foucault’s engagement with the subject of power by offering an analysis that remains fundamentally spatial: it addresses the question of how to redefine the space of power once we subtract the assumption of the centralised position of the sovereign as the focal point and pivot of any political theory of power. As Lambert



explains, the problem that Foucault faces is primarily epistemological: it ensues from the rejection of the assumption underpinning a large part of the history of philosophy before him, namely the equation of power with the soul (Aristotle), substance (Spinoza), or subject (Hegel and Marx), and the notion that power can (and should) be rationalised in a general system of thinking.

At first glance, therefore, the two works appear as opposites: Huffer's Foucault is the 'poet of unreason' (p. 1), whereas Lambert highlights the rigorous organisation of Foucault's thought by drawing attention to its fundamental geometrical 'elements'. Yet challenging commentators like Truss, both works share an insistence that the rejection of absolute systems of thinking and 'truth' in Foucault does not unleash a descent into relativism. This can be seen in the common reference to (or questioning of) the possibility of rationalisation. For Lambert, this is expressed specifically in a method that allows Foucault to capture his ongoing object of study: power. It is in light of what power is *not* that a rethinking of the 'method' with which power is studied becomes possible and necessary. For Foucault, power is an attribute, never a substance: as such; it requires a method of study that enables him to capture its indefiniteness, while not crystalizing it into a coherent and fixed theory. For Lambert, Foucault's is an 'analytical-political philosophy' that cannot offer more than an 'axiomatized theory' (p. 19). It starts from the axiom of power (in its indefinite manifestations) and bends the plane of intensities and forces in light of power's concrete and actual historical manifestations. The aim of Foucault's enquiry is to develop models and conceptual devices for understanding power relations in their actual expressions, rather than serving a pre-determined idea of rationality which transcends the historical arrangements of power and knowledge (p. 28). As such, Foucault's system is one that cannot conceive of models by intuition alone.

This rejection of rationalisation has two main consequences, and here Lambert comes closer to Huffer's argument, albeit from a different starting point.

First, Foucault's rejection of rationalisation leads to the impossibility of a global theory of power: an axiomatic theory enables him to build a framework of understanding, but without totalising and saturating the outcome in a generalised conclusion abstracted from its historical context. This speaks to Huffer's claim for 'unreason', with which eros coincides: eros is the call from the outside, the ever-present 'beyond' that escapes conditions of intelligibility and disrupts settled ways of thinking and understanding.

Second, Foucault's analytical-political philosophy cannot coincide with a moral judgment or imperative (i.e. a normative view of power and its effects), since this move would fall prey to the same process of saturation and totalisation of space with a knowledge of power abstracted from its reality. For Lambert, Foucault seeks to offer a practical knowledge, a series of 'tactical interventions' (p. 22) for orienting oneself in a field of real forces that make the plane of power always already malleable and 'curved' (p. 33). This latter point resonates with Huffer's



insistence on Foucault's work as an 'ethopoietic' enterprise: it is an ethics that stands opposed to a morality and captures the 'styles of life' (p. 32) that disrupt the plane of the living. In the book, the discontinuity of such disruption is produced, poetically and graphically, through the use of brackets inspired by Anne Carson's work on Sappho. The use of Sapphic brackets becomes a method to enable a narration that remains fragmented and thus inspires new interpretations, connections, and combinations. Ethics are experiments in living that work poetically and parenthetically to stage new and strange encounters.

The frequent references to method lead to a second area of comparison between the two works: if the plane of power is already organised, even if in a mobile manner, in such a way that any new insertion can further curve the plane and be absorbed into the gravitational horizon of discourse, then the only critique possible is through the 'bracketing' of given and fixed meanings and interpretations: the use of brackets in Huffer's work mentioned above, inspired by Sappho's poetry, offers a diacritical device that creates absences and inscribes a hiatus into a present that is already saturated of meaning. The outside cannot be captured by a geometrical system of lines and planes that are more or less curved, more or less bent, but only by the absence of defined spaces of meaning. Against Lambert's turn to the Cartesian *more geometrico* that organises thought by starting from its axioms, it is Sappho who guides the structure and the style of Huffer's work: the choice of verses and fragments over clear connecting lines and a privileging of absences over figures that fill up the space of intellectual enquiry. A Sapphic (non-)structure renounces any pretence to totality, saturation, and organisation, because the outside can only be evoked by its non-representation and, therefore, by an absence.

Lambert's analysis reaches one of its high points in the discussion of the *dispositif* as a 'conceptual device', a discussion that occupies the second part of article II of the book. This is where Foucault's 'nominalist approach' (p. 19) is illustrated with utmost clarity. Lambert engages with Foucault's theorisation of the *dispositif* as an effort to distinguish Foucault's explanation of the working of power from similar but more ontologically loaded concepts ('machine', 'apparatus', and 'structure' are the ones that recur more often). Contrary to rival terms used in the history of philosophical analysis, *dispositif* needs to be understood as a 'generalised strategy' that links multiple points and events towards a certain order or end not predetermined by the whole (p. 49). As such, the term *dispositif* captures the continuous morphing of power that, to use a key Heideggerian distinction, cannot be given ontological primacy but must be grasped through its ontic and existential manifestations.

Huffer's emphasis, conversely, remains on 'Foucault's ethopoietic method: an ethics of eros as a poetic' (p. 1), in which Foucault's eros is understood as 'the outside' and 'invites a focus on how Foucault's writing opens towards the erosion of the interiority of the thinking subject' (p. 2). Eros is initially described as a 'murmur', the background sound that is present when no one tries to pin it down for



knowledge or capture. In one of the most eloquent and beautiful propositions in Huffer's book, eros is compared to the 'unknotting and loosening of a fabric' (5), indicating the constant practice of self-undoing and unbinding that leads to 'thinking as an ethical practice of freedom' (p. 5). Huffer, too, is in search of a method in Foucault, which she describes as 'a theoretical-practical, ethopoietic *ars erotica* of the archive in that double sense: as a strange erotic excavation of the historically sedimented networks of relations Foucault calls the historical a priori' (p. 8). Method is here seen as practical because 'it engages with unreason in ways that can suspend and transform everyday practices of living' (p. 8). They are experiments of self-undoing. Eros pushes the epistemic boundaries of the present and is thus endowed with a poietic and transformative power. Crucially, eros is described as a 'verb' (without a subject) rather than a noun: it identifies an agentic capacity of freeing oneself from the constraints of given epistemic conditions.

Foucault's interlocutors across the two books are many, and only partially reflect the 'usual suspects': Lambert juxtaposes Foucault's discussion of the *dispositif* with Giorgio Agamben's and Gilles Deleuze's and offers excellent criticism of the differences between Foucault's analysis of power and key critical theories of the past forty years—from Deleuze and Felix Guattari to Agamben, Maurizio Lazzarato, Paul Virilio, and Louis Althusser. Huffer draws from a broader range of figures: along with a clear and perhaps unavoidable engagement with Herbert Marcuse, she brings Foucault into dialogue with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Monique Wittig, Anne Carson, Sappho, Sigmund Freud, Descartes and Hegel. Crucially, she reads them all as 'poets' (p. 39) rather than structured thinkers. The Marcuse of *Eros and Civilisation*, in particular, is a necessary point of reference, inasmuch as he invites us to think the 'political value of eros' (Marcuse, 1966, p. xxv) as an ethical question with political implications for the present. This angle becomes particularly evident when Huffer links Foucault's ethopoietic method to political activism such as the Black Panthers and Black Lives Matter (pp. 124–129). Descartes is present in both works: whereas he is influential for Lambert's Foucault for his *more geometrico* and ability to derive inferences from axiomatic postulates, Huffer's Descartes is the 'evil genius', the haunting, constantly-escaping force that calls us to abandon systems of thinking and well-worn paths of rational explanation to point to an outside that escapes conceptualisation.

If there are limits to the books under review, they emerge from a joint reading and the broader perspectives that each author brings to light. On the one hand, Huffer limits Foucault's engagement with power only to its disciplinary manifestations: the preoccupation remains with the disciplinary commitments that consist of manipulative practices of surveillance in the control society. This focus bypasses the plural 'grids of intelligibility' that, as Lambert highlights, become new planes of reference to describe the ever-evolving practices and modalities of power not only in its disciplinary but also in its biopolitical manifestations. It might strike the reader as surprising that Huffer does not explicitly address the question of where



her reflections around eros, ethics, and unreason stand with regard to the better-known concept of resistance that, especially in the late Foucault, is linked to an ethical practice. But these resonances might deliberately remain parenthetical, present in their absence, ‘in brackets’, in line with a Sapphic search for fragments.

Lambert’s geometrical method, which traces Foucault’s system to its basic elements, fails to consider how we can conceptualize what is beyond the gravitational plane of power, that is, the thought of the ‘outside’ of the grid of intelligibility. What is missing, then, is a reflection on the ethical, on resistance, and on the excess that simply cannot be absorbed within the grid. Indeed, it is as if the *more geometrico* points to another system that cannot be reduced to the same axioms. Whether a non-Euclidean geometry would be required for this task is, perhaps, a question for a different book.

In conclusion, despite their limitations, the two books under review demonstrate the porosity of Foucault’s writing and thought. Together, the books remind the reader that Foucault’s *oeuvre* should primarily be read as a warning against the temptation to aspire to a saturation of meaning, both in one’s intellectual work and in one’s everyday style and experiences. They show that the refusal of a transhistorical universal substance (identified with either power or ethical values) does not amount to relativism or nihilism. Lambert achieves this by picturing the malleability of Foucault’s analytic of power: while we can identify its building blocks, we have to remain open to the shape that power takes through its historical and contingent manifestations which mould its tactics and effects. Huffer, by contrast, emphasises ethics, poetical inspiration, and literary encounters: thought is porous because it is driven by an ethics that strives for what is strange. Together, Lambert and Huffer add to the multiple waves of the ‘discourse on Foucault’, a sea whose defining character is not a nihilistic bottomlessness but its multifaceted currents.

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