

Notes on Transgression

Foucault and Transgression

Why We Study Foucault's "A Preface to Transgression"?

- It provides an early account of F's thinking around the centrality of sexuality to our lives and in particular to the way in which sexuality becomes a site for the construction of knowledge and power. (see Bataille's work on eroticism)
- It examines the centrality of sexuality in a secular and post-enlightenment age – how transgression and the limit has replaced the older dichotomy of the sacred and the profane.
- It reveals the origins of F's anti-humanism which came to dominate much of his later work and a poststructuralist tradition more widely. The humanist tradition (beginning roughly in the 18th century and variously called the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason) instigated a turning away from the strict power the church had over its citizens, in favour of a rationalist and humanist understanding of man's relationship to the world. However, F wants to argue that rather than freeing the individual, it has served to further enslave him/her. He argues:

"In short, humanism is everything in western civilization that restricts "the desire for power": it prohibits the desire for power and excludes the possibility of power being seized"
("Revolutionary" 221-2).

So the development of a theory of transgression is part of his larger project of questioning the presumptions that underlie a humanist tradition (ie, that man is free, rational and constituted as a stable and unified subject). This is the background to his work.

'What is transgression?'

Etymologically transgression has been defined as the process of "crossing-over"; of moving from an ordered rational state to an unordered and irrational state. The act of transgression is the transgressing or passing over or beyond any law, either civil or moral.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition it has also acquired moralistic tones of judgement and is deeply tied to the biblical account of Adam's transgression of a sacred boundary through his acquisition of forbidden knowledge (the eating of the apple from the tree of knowledge) and his subsequent punishment.

In the contemporary era (with the influence of poststructuralism and anti-humanism) transgression is an important concept because it instigates the idea of boundary crossing. For Foucault the concept of transgression illustrates the importance of "a will-to-power".

Central to much of F's work and particularly "A Preface to Transgression" is the work of Bataille, Nietzsche and Sade.

Marquis de Sade (French Revolution)

The concept of transgression was also important to the literary work of the Marquis de Sade in the late 18th century. Sade's erotic prose played quite explicitly with the

boundaries of propriety and decency which were emerging at the time- as part of the Enlightenment (what we take for granted as the modern civil state with bourgeois values that define the proper codes of social life). Sade's work was very much directed against the moral, social and legal boundaries that defined this new civil state after the French Revolution.

- The critical edge that defined Sade's "philosophy of the bedroom" was taken up in the 19th and 20th century as a philosophy of transgression that posited sexuality as its primary force.
- Therefore the link between sexuality and transgression – which is central to Foucault's "A Preface" is derived from a Sadean philosophy of erotics.

Nietzsche

Also central to F's formulation of transgression is Nietzsche's reworking of human existence around the Greek myths of the gods Apollo and Dionysus.

- For Nietzsche, Apollo or the Apollonian is that realm which fixes the limits of the self and culture through the illusion of form. Dionysus on the other hand represents the chaotic realm of flux and motion which Apollonian form strives to control, obscure and deny.
- This dichotomy of the Apollonian and Dionysian, which emerges from Greek culture and continues in the West, is the nature/culture opposition. According to N, Western art becomes in part, a record of this basic struggle and the differing responses to it in various periods of history. These two forces unfold in a sort of spiral (a term that F uses in reference to transgression and the limit.)
- N writes: "Every human embodies a compound of nature and culture, chaos and order, instinct and reason... symbolised by Dionysus and Apollo." (69)
- In some ways, all of F's work is variation on this theme – the Apollonian drive variously taking the name of the "limit" in "Preface to Transgression" and "power" later on in 'Discipline and Punish'. The Apollonian is characterised by the use of reason in the post-Enlightenment era and it actively delimits the chaotic flux of the Dionysian and produces both society on the macro level and the subject on the level of the individual. In relation to the role of reason F writes:

The central issue for philosophy and critical thought since the 19th C has always been, still is, and will, I hope remain the question: What is this reason that we use? What are its limits and its dangers... If it is extremely dangerous to say that reason is the enemy that should be eliminated, it is just as dangerous to say that any critical questioning of this rationality risks sending us into irrationality... if critical thought itself has a function... it is precisely to accept this sort of spiral, this sort of revolving door of rationality that refers us to its necessity... and at the same time to its intrinsic dangers. ("Spaces" 249)

In our current historical period, one characterised by a post-enlightenment faith in reason and a concomitant loss of belief in God, **Foucault locates sexual experience as the final borderline lying between Apollonian rationality and Dionysian realm of flux and the unknown. And that is why F valorises those writers (Bataille and Sade as well as Nietzsche) who explore the limit of madness, writing that explores the underlying assumptions of Western culture, beyond what he calls**

the dialectic of good and evil. (the importance of the spiral rather than a dichotomy – each brought into play by the other).

Bataille

But before Foucault outlined his theory of transgression, the dissident Surrealist writer Georges Bataille, used Sade's work to develop a theory of sexuality and excess. For Bataille "excess" is that which challenges a closed economy (an economy is something predicated on utility, production and rational consumption) and foregrounds the "unassimilable (that which is unable to be assimilated or incorporated) waste products of the body, society and thought". – and Bataille lists things such as excrement, madness, poetry, automutilation, obscenity.

- Bataille's most famous work of fiction, *Story of the Eye*, is an attempt to outline how the literary text is an exemplary model for exploring the boundaries of the modern subject (in particular the modern sexual subject).
- For Bataille individual subjectivity was constituted through the divisions between social, economic, ethical, religious, moral and linguistic encoding. And it is only when the subject crosses any one of these encoded boundaries that they become aware of the limits imposed upon the subject.
- For Bataille, transgressive experience involves the joy or pleasure of passing from an ordered, reasoned realm to an unordered and irrational realm.
- For Foucault, in Bataille's erotic writings "
- Indeed much of Bataille's work was concerned to show the relationship between the sacred and the profane.

Foucault

So Foucault's essay "A Preface to Transgression" is an introduction to as well as an elaboration of the work of Bataille – including the traces of Sade and Nietzsche in Bataille's work. How is it different?

- Foucault's notion of transgression expands on Bataille's more narrow interest in transgression as it relates to literature and individual subjectivity.
- Foucault's interest in transgression is explored both individually and culturally – in terms of social repression and limitation.
- For Foucault the boundaries of the self and the cultural are necessarily illuminated by acts of transgression. Hence the importance of the concept of the "limit" which operates alongside the notion of transgression.
- Foucault's notion of the destabilised subject (one that is neither unified, rational or stable) emerges out of the idea of transgression as the continual crossing of boundaries. For F the subject is defined through a process of "construction" and "deconstruction" and through the separation of the individual (or self) and the "other" – also referred to as the self/other dichotomy.
- Individual and collective subjectivity is therefore defined through a dual process of the demarcation of appropriate values and the exportation of inappropriate values on to the "other". ***For eg. in terms of sexuality this dualism would be defined through normative or procreative sexuality on the one hand and deviant sexuality (homosexuality) on the other.***

- So here the construction of self and “other” that has defined much of the work in cultural theory rests on Foucault’s notion of boundary crossing; **of the continued movement or spiral between the appropriate and the inappropriate.**
- So Foucault’s notion of transgression offers a valid explanation for the prevalence of extremes, of excess within contemporary fiction and other cultural practices.
- He argues that transgression has become the site of profanation in a world without the sacred (in a secular world). Without the sacred, he argues, sexuality is **“perhaps the only source of division now possible in a world emptied of objects, beings and spaces to desecrate.” (9) Thus sexuality has become the sole subject of taboos and limits.**

The Uses of Foucault’s work

- In contemporary cultural theory Foucault’s notion of transgression (the dual process of the self defined in relation to the “other) became preoccupied with the notion of “difference” – specifically in relation to class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality.
- In a groundbreaking book by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, ***The Politics and Poetics of Transgression(1986)***, the influence of Foucault is evident. Both literary theorists, Stallybrass and White suggest that the notion of transgression is important to all areas of cultural analysis: history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy etc. While Foucault’s work heralded the deconstruction of the modern subject, other areas of analysis were similarly brought into question so that the production of identity through negation came to dominate cultural work. What was taken to be essential and ahistorical (or timeless) was suddenly shown to be constructed and open to historical specificity and investigation. Academics began treating subjectivity, the body, manners, places and behaviour as historical documents requiring investigation and interpretation - for As Stallybrass and White suggest “what is socially peripheral may be symbolically central” to an understanding of the relationship between individual and social life.
- Therefore transgression has become an important concept for understanding how liminal or minority experiences help to form larger social and cultural boundaries.

Part Two: Transgression, Perversion and Feminism

Why has the notion of transgression and/or perversion been of interest to feminism?

Some definitions of perversion:

- Very broadly perversion can be described as the opposite to what is considered right, reasonable or accepted.

- Therefore, as Jonathon Dollimore argues, **perversion is an important category for cultural analysis precisely because it contests that which is normal and accepted.**

1. Freud

The importance and centrality of perversion, particularly sexual perversion, to cultural analysis can be traced back to Freud's broad mapping of human sexuality. In a number of his early essays on sexuality, Freud gives an account of sexual perversion that has had an enormous influence on feminism, as well as Queer theory and cultural analysis.

According to Freud, the human infant begins life with a sexual disposition, which is "polymorphously perverse" (definition) and innately bisexual. In order for socialization to take place (that is for the successful gendering of the individual to occur), these perversions must be given up, and this occurs typically through repression.

Although Freud's account of human sexuality is notoriously contradictory, the radical aspect of this account of perversion suggests that the human gendered subject is **produced** through culture rather than naturally constituted.

Central to this argument is the idea that these perversions do not go away but help to maintain and constitute the social order. **So we might ask how do they do this?**

That perversion needs to be repressed in the first place attests to its importance in the maintenance of what is considered normal – perversion (and not morality) is, according to Jonathan Dollimore, "the cement of culture" (179, "The Cultural Politics of Perversion").

Therefore, in Freud's argument, it is perversion that is the given in human nature. And because the process of repression can never be guaranteed to work, sexual normality is precariously achieved and maintained.

-(and writers as diverse as Sade, Bataille, Foucault, Deleuze, Merck and Butler have been extremely interested in the premise of Freud's argument even if they have tended to disagree with its detail).

To summarise Freud here, the human subject attains social identity and sexual identity through the repression of perversion – therefore normality is maintained at the risk of its failure. As a result, Freud notes, Civilization remains precarious and unstable.

Why does perversion threaten to destabilise civilization? According to Freud:

'the abandonment of the reproductive function is the common feature of perversion. We actually describe a sexual activity as perverse if it has given up the aim of reproduction and pursues the attainment of pleasure as an aim independent of it.'

So why is it that perversion, in the sense of a general deviation, be intrinsically thought of as bad. Jonathan Dollimore argues:

**“part of the answer lies in the fact that perversion is regulated by the binary opposition between the natural and the unnatural”.
(181)**

So in this sense perversion becomes a form of transgression because it goes against the limit of normative (ie reproductive) sexuality but the two terms are not simply the same.

However, both perversion and transgression have been linked to a strategy of cultural resistance, particularly in terms of the gay liberation movements the 60's and 70's, which F is obviously writing out of.

- **But transgression did not only occur in gay liberation, key to the ideas of the sexual revolution was the notion that a radical sexual politics could in some way “free” the individual from normative social restraints, that the “polymorphously perverse” (remember Freud’s term to describe innate sexuality) could be desublimated. In the liberation from sexual repression, the argument goes, a new energy would emerge, one capable of transforming the entire social domain.**
- **As Dollimore notes, these ideas are no longer so strong within the present, but although we no longer talk about the “polymorphous perverse”, the structuring dynamic of perversion (through a same and other dichotomy) - ie that the perverse is that which normative culture must create in order to survive as separate from. The concept of difference will be taken up next week when we look at homophobic violence.**

Central to Foucault’s development of a theory of transgression is what has been called his anti-humanist position. In an interview in 1971 he advocates the liberation of the subject’s will-to-power through what he calls “limit-experience”, brought about through both political and cultural means, including:

“The suppression of taboos and the limitations and divisions imposed upon the sexes... the loosening of inhibitions with regard to drugs; the breaking of all the prohibitions which form and guide the development of a normal individual. I am referring to all those experiences which have been rejected by our civilization or which it only accepts in literature” (Ibid. 222)

Further Reading

Charles Lemert, *Michel Foucault : social theory and transgression* New York : Columbia University Press, 1982.

Jon Simons, *Foucault & the political*. London and New York : Routledge, 1995.