The Cultivation Of The Self In The Age Of The Proliferation Of Sexual Identities

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In today’s culture, to know who you are is to be confined to your own sexuality. One’s own subjectivity is reduced, defined, and limited by the domain of sexuality. In the midst of all, paradoxically, a proliferation of sexual identities is taking place as a form of resistance. While this unfolding of sexual identities confronts the limitation of the present field of sexuality, it nonetheless deepens, directly or indirectly, the linkage between one’s own subjectivity and sexuality. Nonetheless, this relationship between one’s own subjectivity and sexual identity requires the embodiment of specific appearances, behaviors, and practices. Ironically, this very embodiment is what allows the “cultivation of the self.” To cultivate and attend to oneself is to embody sets of practices through which one creates “not just a momentary preparation for living,” but also “a form of living”¹. Through cultivating oneself, perhaps, we can overcome the predominance of sexuality in how we define ourselves. One of the important tasks of self-cultivation, Foucault suggests, is the technology of unlearning where one is empowered to critically get rid of all bad habits and false opinions he acquired from all authorities around him². By unlearning one’s own previous perception, as well as embodiment of a specific sexual identity, one hopefully accomplishes the creation of a subjectivity that is not confined by sexual identity and carries a lifelong project of creating one’s own unique self through many other possibilities outside of sexuality.

² Ibid, 97.
Under the predominance of sexuality, the proliferation of sexual identities is used sometimes as a resisting strategy to the current place of sexuality in our society. However, it rather seems to serve this hegemony of the domain of sexuality by deepening the notion that one’s subjectivity is unthinkable without sexuality. This reinforcement of the predominance of sexuality that comes with the proliferation of sexual identities is due to both sharing the conditions of power as a productive force and the necessity for a system of differentiations.

When power no longer only defines subjects in the juridical sense, but also creates discourses in which subjects are assigned to specific identities, power intervenes and rules our relationship with ourselves and with others. Power is no longer repressing or eliminating; rather, it is inventing and producing. This understanding of emerging territories of power relocates one’s relation to the discourses of sexuality differently. Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality I* critiques the traditional approach that conceives the relationship between sexuality and power only in terms of repression. Foucault challenges this view by emphasizing a different yet crucial objective, that “the point to consider is not the level of indulgence or the quantity of repression but the form of power that was exercised.”

The way sexuality is exercised today over one’s subjectivity demands not only a separation between them, but also a historical investigation on how sexuality and subjectivity has become interchangeable and almost identical. This investigation was made possible through Foucault’s project on sexuality. Examining the proliferation of sexual identities with the same scope, Foucault’s historiography of the establishment of sexual identity makes one wonder if today’s endless proliferation of sexuality is another era in which one’s subjectivity still entails “an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals”4. Today, the subjectivity of individuals is not only confined to the domain of sexuality, but also forced to keep up in the race of sexual identities. For instance, people who are bisexual, queer, asexual and many other forms of sexual identities are becoming “a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly mysterious physiology,” which Foucault once described as homosexuality5. It appears that both the predominance of sexuality and the proliferation of sexual identities are partners in crime, in which they reduce one’s individuality to a sexual specification, even though the latter is shown as a form of resistance.

With greater sexual choices, the field of sexuality becomes wider and full of possibilities. But even though this proliferation opens new fields of struggle and invention, it upholds the system of differentiation that characterizes the power relations of the domain of sexuality. In general, unlike democratic regimes, totalitarian regimes are built on the unification of their subjects, while democratic and liberal regimes establish themselves on the diversity and autonomy of their individuals. Juridical power is more exercised in totalitarian regimes, but on the contrary every power relation in democratic regimes “puts into operation differences that are, at the same time, its conditions and its results.”6. These differences range from economic and social to linguistic and cultural differences7. However, they invade one’s subjectivity and individuality in which one is categorized into a specified identity or law of truth8. Basing differences on identity and not subjectivity forces one to imprison her own subjectivity under the domain of identity; and today sexuality is becoming interchangeable with identity in these democratic liberal societies.

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4 Ibid, 43.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid, 331.
Even though both the proliferation of sexual identity and the confinement to the domain of sexuality subjugate oneself to the system of differentiation, the former seems to be determined by choice, in which the individual chooses his own difference such as sexual identity through “conscience or self-knowledge”\(^9\). Wherever there is a self-knowledge process, practical implications of this knowledge come with it. When one, through personal investigation, redefines his sexual identity, he begins to embody new ways of identifying, expressing and enacting his own subjectivity. To know and then to put this knowledge into action is a traditional method of discovering one’s own subjectivity. It follows the understanding of modern philosophy to the Socratic principle “know yourself” as Foucault claims. The problem of this method is that it will never achieve subjectivity. It only creates a theoretical image in which one tries to impose on his or her own reality. With Foucault, the equation is reversed. For one to live his own subjectivity, one has to begin from it. In other words, for one to know herself, one has to care for herself first, and through self-loving the individual will be able to live the truths of herself. This reversed if not fundamental principle is, as Foucault calls, the self-cultivation principle.

Interestingly, both manifesting sexual identities and employing the principle of self-cultivation encompass the embodiment of set of practices, behaviors, and techniques. This embodiment opens the possibility of a greater transformation. One hopes that the embodiment of the principle of self-care will alter the long-rooted reproduction of specific sexual identifications. To achieve this transformation through self-cultivation, one of the most important tasks is to unlearn oneself. Foucault describes this technology of unlearning as a refinement of the self from not only false opinion obtained through parents, teachers, or the multitudes, but also an attentiveness of one’s own bad habits\(^10\). Perhaps, amongst this unstoppable production of sexuality and its identity, it is necessary for one to examine the false opinion he acquired about sex, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, changing the bad habit of imprisoning one’s subjectivity under the domain of sexuality is a condition for the emergence of new ways of enacting one’s subjectivity. Thinking of myself, it is only through the unlearning of the bad habit of defining myself within the narrow and ascribed possibilities of being a heterosexual male can I replace it with a good habit of defining my sexuality by my self-cultivated subjectivity. This lifelong project is a practical performance in which one cultivates himself.

The proliferation of sexual identities makes resistance possible through cultivating oneself, for both are concerned with what one is doing and not who he is. Arriving at this, Foucault’s endeavor becomes possible: where one thinks of his own subjectivity outside of the domain of sexuality; where other domains of pleasure, innovation, and new forms of relations are brought forth not only for contemplation, but also as lifelong projects.

\(^9\) Ibid.