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Foucault and Familial Power

CHLOË TAYLOR

This paper provides an overview of Michel Foucault's continually changing observations on familial power, as well as the feminist-Foucauldian literature on the family. It suggests that these accounts offer fragments of a genealogy of the family that undermine any all-encompassing or transhistorical account of the institution. Approaching the family genealogically, rather than seeking a single model of power that can explain it, shows that far from this institution being a quasi-natural formation or a bedrock of unassailable values, it is in fact a continually contested fiction that masks its own histories of becoming.

A number of feminist scholars, including Ellen K. Feder, Ladelle McWhorter, Jon Simons, Vikki Bell, and Caroline Knowles, have drawn on the writings of Michel Foucault in order to analyze the institution of the family. At least two of these authors have suggested that Foucault himself neglected to examine this institution as a result of his androcentrism (Simons 1996, 179; Feder 2007b, 17, 40, 108).¹ With the recent publications of Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France, however, we have discovered that Foucault discussed the family in considerable detail on several occasions. In addition to the references to the family in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1975/1977, 215–16) and *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1976/1978, 103–14) of which we were already aware, we now know that Foucault offered extensive analyses of the familial institution in both *Abnormal* (Foucault 1999/2004, 245–78) and *Psychiatric Power* (Foucault 2003/2006, 79–116), as well as in the little-read and untranslated volume, *Le désordre des familles: Lettres de cachet des archives de la Bastille* (Foucault 1982)—a work on which none of the above-mentioned authors draw.

In what follows, I will first summarize Foucault's continually changing observations about the family in these texts, and then provide an overview of the feminist-Foucauldian literature on the family. Finally, I will suggest that

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although these accounts are occasionally presented as a “theory” of the family (“the family as disciplinary institution” or “the family as sovereign institution”), what they in fact offer are fragments of a genealogy of the family that undermine any all-encompassing or transhistorical account of the institution. Approaching the family genealogically, rather than seeking a single model of power that can explain it at all times and in all places, shows that far from this institution being a quasi-natural formation or a bedrock of unassailable values, it is in fact a continually contested fiction that masks its own histories of becoming. Although this may not be news to feminist scholars, in today’s political climate it is nevertheless a lesson that we can bear being reminded of again and again.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE FAMILY

In at least four of Foucault’s five accounts of familial power, the family is a traditionally sovereign institution whose power has been slowly diluted over time. The family, Foucault suggests, has been infiltrated by discipline and co-opted by biopower in “supplementary” ways. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the ancient Roman *familia* as the pure example of sovereign power (Foucault 1976/1978, 135). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault notes that “one day we shall show how intra-familial relations, essentially in the parents-children cell, have become ‘disciplined,’ absorbing since the classical age external schemata, first educational and then military, then medical, psychiatric, psychological . . .” (Foucault 1975/1977, 215–16). The family has been disciplined, Foucault acknowledges, but these mechanisms are deemed “external” to the type of power that continues to characterize the family. Discipline, Foucault claims, has been absorbed by the family rather than constituting it.

Foucault gives his most sustained account of the family in terms of disciplinary and sovereign power in a lecture included in *Psychiatric Power*. Here we find the clearest articulation of Foucault’s view that the family is and remains a sovereign institution. “[I]t seems to me,” he states, “that the family is a sort of cell within which the power exercised is not, as one usually says, disciplinary, but rather of the same type as the power of sovereignty” (Foucault 2003/2006, 79). Ironically, although Foucault so often argues that we theorize power as sovereign when it is in fact disciplinary, in the case of the family he makes the reverse claim: whereas we think of the family as disciplinary, it is actually sovereign. “[F]or my part,” he says, “I would put the functioning and microphysics of the family completely on the side of the power of sovereignty, and not at all on that of disciplinary power” (80). Insofar as the family disciplines, these practices have merely been “grafted onto” the institution, and the family could and often does function without them: “Supervision is not constitutive of but supplementary to the family, whereas permanent supervision is absolutely constitutive of disciplinary systems” (80).

In this discussion of the family, Foucault is retracting his own argument, in *History of Madness*, according to which psychiatric asylums modeled themselves on the family in order to refamiliarize the insane. According to the thesis of *History of Madness*, psychiatrists submitted their patients to a paternal form of power. Fifteen years later, Foucault is saying that the power of paternity is in fact quite *different* from the power of doctors. As he puts it:

I do not think it is true that the family served as the model for the asylum, school, barracks, or workshop. Actually, it seems to me that nothing in the way the family functions enables us to see any continuity between the family and the institutions, the disciplinary apparatuses, I am talking about (Foucault 2003/2006, 80)

When Foucault wrote *History of Madness*, he had not yet distinguished between the forms of power that he would later call sovereign and disciplinary. By 1973, having done so, he came to conclude that psychiatric power, as a paradigm of discipline, was distinct from familial (paternal) power, which he would now characterize as sovereign, and thus psychiatric power could not be paternal or familial.

Sovereign power, Foucault explains, is grounded either in blood-right or blood-conquest (Foucault 2003/2006, 43). With sovereign power, there is always a “founding precedence” situated in the past, such as a battle or royal birth, which justifies the sovereign’s power. Sovereign power regularly reaffirms its authority through rituals that refer back to this original event of bloodshed or blood-right. Additionally, under sovereign power, individuality is located at the top, in the body of the sovereign, whereas those submitted to sovereign power are not individuated (45). We may think of Hobbes’s picture of the Leviathan, whose body is made up of the indistinguishable bodies of its subjects. Only the head of the Leviathan could be considered a portrait. In contrast, disciplinary power is future-oriented, replacing backward-looking rituals with graduated exercises aiming at an optimal future state (47). Discipline is justified by the perceived desirability of the disciplined state that its practices bring about: the well-trained soldier, the highly achieving student, the orderly ward, the productive workshop. Discipline is thus forward-looking, in opposition to sovereign power. In disciplinary institutions, power is de-individualized—one warden could be replaced by another warden or even by a surveillance camera—whereas those submitted to discipline are individualized (54). For Foucault, in the sovereign–discipline dichotomy, the family can be situated as a sovereign institution.

Most obviously, the authority of parents over their children is normally one of blood-right. The results of DNA tests make a difference with respect to what power certain people have over other people. Specific parents have authority over specific children because their own blood runs in their veins. Parents may monitor their children, they may keep them prisoners in their homes, they

may discipline them to brush their teeth and keep them on a strict timetable, but they have the authority to do so (or not) because of a blood-right that is intimately known, and not as a consequence of the anonymous workings of disciplinary power. Disciplinary practices thus supplement the family but do not constitute it: a family that does not discipline its children is still a family. Similarly, marriage was traditionally understood as a conquest involving bloodshed (the breaking of the hymen), and the community accepted this alliance only once the woman's blood was seen. Blood, then, has historically been as important to the husband–wife axis as to the parent–child axis of the family, although it is blood in the form of bloodshed or conquest rather than birth or descent, and although this manner of viewing marriage is clearly more outdated in the West than the similarly blood-based view of parenthood.

Also situating it on the side of sovereign power, the celebration of backward-looking rituals, such as birthdays and wedding anniversaries, regularly reminds the family's members of its authority; these rituals recall foundational moments of bloodshed and birth. As Foucault writes, "It is this reference to the earlier act, to the status conferred once and for all [by marriage or birth], which gives the family its solidity . . ." (Foucault 2003/2006, 80). The family, like sovereign institutions more generally, aims to be solid and static, to reproduce itself or to stay the same, in contrast to the ever-expanding, creative, annexing, and innovative institutions of disciplinary power (Foucault 1976/1978, 107).

More contentiously, Foucault argues that fathers are individuated in the family, like the head of the Leviathan, in a way that no other family members are. Foucault asks rhetorically, "What do we see in the family if not a function of maximum individualization on the side of the person who exercises power, that is to say, on the father's side?" (Foucault 2003/2006, 80). The power of patriarchs over their family members lacks the anonymity of the panoptic system:

The . . . ribbon of undifferentiated power which unwinds indefinitely in a panoptic system, is utterly foreign to the constitution of the family, in which the father, as bearer of the name, and insofar as he exercises power in his name, is the most intense pole of individualization, much more intense than the wife or children. So in the family you have individualization at the top, which recalls and is of the very same type as the power of sovereignty, the complete opposite of disciplinary power. (80)

We might think of Aristotle's discussion of the family in which there is the patriarch, on the one hand, and wives, slaves, and children, on the other. There is only a limited differentiation among wives, slaves, and children, whereas there is a radical divide between these three groups and the *pater familias*.

In *Psychiatric Power*, Foucault argues that despite the manners in which the family has been invaded by new technologies of power, the sovereign power of

the family continues to play a crucial collaborative role within a disciplinary society. For one thing, the family's sovereign power is essential for inserting family members into disciplinary institutions. The family insists that its children go to school, that its sons do military service, and that its members go to work each day. When children and spouses fail to do these things, it is often the family that hands them over to disciplinary institutions, consigning them to asylums or taking them to therapy and rehab.

This collaboration with the disciplinary institutions is not a one-sided relation or mere evidence that the family has been co-opted by discipline. On the contrary, families turn their members over to disciplinary institutions because the favor is reciprocated: the disciplinary institutions return children and spouses after having transformed them into familialized subjects, individuals who will submit to the family and its goals. As Foucault notes in *Madness and Civilization*, Philippe Pinel observed that “nowhere except in novels have I seen spouses more worthy of being cherished, parents more tender, lovers more passionate, or persons more attached to their duties than the majority of the insane fortunately brought to the period of convalescence” (Foucault 1961/1965, 258). Nineteenth-century psychiatrists, like Freud a century later, viewed marriage as testament to a woman's cure, as well as “a preservative against . . . insanity . . .” (258). The morality that passes as psychiatric cure prescribes marriage and parenthood against drunkenness, promiscuity, illegality, disorder, negligence, and laziness, all behaviors that undermine the family's goals. For Foucault, the sovereign institution of the family and the very different disciplinary institutions with which it interacts are thus in a series of symbiotic relations today.

Against Foucault's argument for the sovereignty of familial power in *Psychiatric Power*, we can, however, point out that, at least in recent decades in the West, the family does not justify its power *exclusively* through backward-looking rituals, but *also* through its ability to produce well-disciplined subjects. The family accomplishes this production through graduated exercises, often involving a strict timetable, that aim at a future optimal state: the production of healthy, “normal” adults. A family that fails to produce well-disciplined and normal subjects may lose its authority over its members through the interventions of state and disciplinary agents. In the modern family, the power of the father has moreover been greatly diminished. The father's sovereign power to punish in spectacular ways has virtually disappeared in Western societies, and, if exercised, may also lead to interventions by disciplinary institutions. For the most part forbidden, like the state, to punish corporally, the family resorts to techniques such as isolation and privation, “grounding,” “time-out,” and the withdrawals of privileges and freedoms, thus more closely reproducing the punitive strategies of the prison than those of Renaissance kings. The sovereign power of fathers and husbands over the sexuality of their children and wives is

also subject to disciplinary interventions. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault discusses the removal of children from families suspected of incest (Foucault 1976/1978, 129–30). Moreover, contra Foucault, mothers have often been more individuated—at least in the eyes of their children—than fathers. Margaret Atwood, describing typical North American middle-class families of the 1930s from the perspective of female children, writes that “in the daily life of houses, fathers are largely invisible” (Atwood 1988, 129). Finally, even the most indisputable reason for viewing the family as sovereign—the significance of blood—is being diminished under the pressures of reproductive technologies such as *in vitro* fertilization and increasingly accepted family forms such as same-sex couples and parents.

In contrast to *Psychiatric Power*, in *The History of Sexuality* Foucault describes the disciplining and biopoliticization of the family in the modern era in some detail, observing the manners in which the nineteenth-century family was penetrated by the sexual sciences and became saturated with sexuality. According to Foucault, there are “four great strategic unities which, beginning in the eighteenth century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex,” and these are the onanistic child, the hysterical woman, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult. Corresponding with these, there were “four great strategies” in the nineteenth-century deployment of sexuality: “the sexualization of children, the hystericization of women, the specification of the perverted, and the regulation of populations—all strategies that went by way of a family which must be viewed, not as a powerful agency of prohibition, but as a major factor of sexualization” (Foucault 1976/1978, 114). The three great axes of biopower—pedagogy, medicine, and demography—target the three main units within the family respectively: children, women, and the reproductive couple. Pedagogy waged war on the onanistic practices of children; medicine “saturated” the feminine and maternal bodies with sexuality; and demography took up the regulation of population, monitoring births and birth control practices (104–5). The fourth domain of the deployment of sexuality, the taxonomization of perversions, is, Foucault acknowledges, more marginally a familial matter; however, he discusses the manners in which families collaborated with doctors in this regard. Because the family is the privileged locus of at least three of the four major strategies in the deployment of sexuality, it is described by Foucault as the target *par excellence* of biopower (108).

Because Foucault discusses the family in *The History of Sexuality* in terms of these modern practices of biopower as they are deployed by disciplinary figures such as doctors, teachers, and psychologists, we might think that Foucault sees the family as an *exclusively* biopolitical and disciplinary institution in *The History of Sexuality*. Indeed, most scholars writing on the family from a Foucauldian perspective have assumed this. In fact, however, a careful reading of this work shows that Foucault contrasts the biopolitical deployment of sexuality with an

older, sovereign, juridico-legal deployment of alliance, and argues that the family is characterized by the deployment of alliance *as well as* the deployment of sexuality. He writes:

It is not exact to say that the deployment of sexuality supplanted the deployment of alliance. One can imagine that one day it will have replaced it. But as things stand at present, while it does tend to cover up the deployment of alliance, it has neither obliterated the latter nor rendered it useless. (Foucault 1976/1978, 107)

This deployment of alliance is characteristic of sovereign power as it may be contrasted, “term for term,” with disciplinary power and biopower (106–9). The traditional deployment of alliance is a static system of prohibitions, in contrast to the modern deployment of sexuality, which is mobile, polymorphous, and contingent in its techniques, continually expanding its areas and forms of control. The deployment of alliance is repressive, whereas the deployment of sexuality is productive. In the final chapter of *The History of Sexuality*, the sovereign symbolics of alliance and blood are contrasted with the biopolitical analytics of sex. “Systems of alliance” are called “the political form of the sovereign,” in which, as in the family, “the value of descent lines were predominant” (147).

Insofar as Foucault is arguing in *The History of Sexuality* that the modern family is the site of both a deployment of alliance and a deployment of sexuality, he is characterizing it as an institution of both sovereign and disciplinary power. Indeed, Foucault argues that the analytics of sex and the symbolics of blood and alliance, although “two very distinct regimes of power,” are characterized by “overlappings, interactions, and echoes,” and the family and marriage are noted as two of the sites of interaction between these forms of power (Foucault 1976/1978, 149). Put simply, sovereign power is about blood, biopower is about sex, and today the family is about both. Historically this was not the case: for much of history the family was almost exclusively preoccupied by blood, and its relation to sex was primarily one of prohibition. Today, however, the sexualization of the family is so intense that it almost masks the underlying significance of blood.

THE FAMILY DISCIPLINED, DISCIPLINING, AND PENETRATED BY BIOPOWER

In *Le désordre des familles* (Foucault 1982), Foucault and his co-editor, Arlette Farge, provide a collection of documents illustrating the collaboration of family and police in an effort to rid society of its abnormal members at the end of the Ancien Régime, a time that for Foucault marked the transition from sovereign to disciplinary power and, somewhat later, biopolitics, and a time when the

family was not yet the private and nuclear cell that we know today. Although we might expect the *lettres de cachet* to serve as examples of the arbitrary and oppressive sovereign powers of the family and the king, they in fact demonstrate the rise of disciplinary and biopolitical powers: the role of the police as intermediary between family and state, the unexpected participation and influence of the poor and of women in the incarceration of the sexually and socially deviant, and the beginning of a new vision of the family.

Along similar lines, in a 1975 lecture collected in *Abnormal*, Foucault argues that a “new” kind of family was “born” in the nineteenth century, and has “replaced” the older form of the family. Foucault describes this novel institution as having a structure different from its earlier forms. The new family is a medicalized, panoptic, and normalizing entity, and parents function as doctors within it—or, to be exact, as the dupes, clones, and instruments of doctors, therapists, and biopolitical state interests. Parents have ceded their sovereign right over their children through their submission to biopower in return for an incestuous control over their children’s sexuality that they have since lost. For Foucault, in this lecture, the apparently sovereign power that parents exercise over their children is in fact a mere “fiction.” Practices of normalization are described as “constituting” the newly-born family rather than being merely “grafted” onto an older institution.

In this lecture, Foucault contrasts the kind of family that existed up until the mid-eighteenth century with the family that has “replaced” it—at least among the middle and upper classes. He writes:

Until the middle of the eighteenth century the aristocratic or bourgeois family . . . was above all a sort of relational system. It was a bundle of relations of ancestry, descent, collateral relations, cousinhood, primogeniture, and alliances corresponding to schemas for the transmission of kinship and the division of goods and social status. Sexual prohibitions effectively focused on these kinds of relations. (Foucault 1999/2004, 248)

In contrast to this traditional family, we now have the modern family, or the biopolitical family cell:

What is now being constituted is a sort of restricted, close-knit, substantial, compact, corporeal, and affective family core: the cell family in place of the relational family; the cell family with its corporeal, affective, and sexual space entirely saturated by direct parent–child relationships. (248)

Whereas the sovereign family forbade incest, the modern family is produced by “incestuous” sexuality.² One of the ways that the family produces “incestuous” desire is through parental monitoring of children’s sexuality. In the nineteenth

century this occurred through a war waged by parents—at the behest of doctors—against masturbation. This war required constant attentiveness to one's children, a smelling of sheets and hands, an alertness to erections, an examination of undergarments, a surveillance of children as they washed, went to bed, woke up, and slept, and even a binding of bodies and a sharing of beds.

Although Foucault claims in *Psychiatric Power* that nothing about the family resembles the strategies of the disciplinary institutions, he now describes parental monitoring of children's sexuality in precisely these terms. First, children are to be isolated: there was “essentially a new organization, a new physics of family space: the elimination of all intermediaries and the suppression, if possible, of domestics, or at least a very close supervision of domestics, the ideal solution being the infant alone in a sexually aseptic family space” (Foucault 1999/2004, 245). And then there is surveillance: “the family space must be a space of continual surveillance Parents must keep a lookout all around their children, over their clothes and bodies. The child's body must be the object of their permanent attention” (245). Sexualization is added to the tactics of isolation and surveillance. The parents' isolation with and attentiveness to children is described as a kind of corporeal envelopment, an absorption into their own bodies.

Of this “incestuous” parent–child relation, Foucault writes, “Of course, the direct parent–child contact so urgently prescribed in this familial cell gives absolute power to parents over their children” (Foucault 1999/2004, 249). But then Foucault casts this assumption into doubt, asking:

All power? Yes and no. In fact, at the very moment when the crusade enjoins parents to take responsibility for the meticulous, detailed, and almost shameful surveillance of their children's bodies, at the moment and by virtue of this injunction itself, parents are essentially connected to a completely different type of relations and control. I mean that when parents are told to be careful to know what is happening to their children's bodies and in their children's beds, when masturbation becomes the object of the moral order of the day, almost the first order of the new ethic of the new family, you will recall that it is not registered at the level of immorality but of illness. . . . So that the internal parental control that parents and mothers are required to exercise is necessarily plugged into an external medical control. Internal parental control must model its forms, criteria, interventions, and decisions on medical reasons and knowledge. . . . The parents–children relationship that is solidifying into a sort of physical-sexual unit must therefore be consistent with the doctor–patient relationship; it must extend the doctor–patient relationship. The father or mother who is so close to the

children's bodies, the father or mother who literally covers the child's body with her own, must at the same time be a father and a mother who are diagnosticians, therapists, and agents of health. (249–50)

In *History of Madness* Foucault had argued that doctors and psychiatrists were father-figures, only to reject that view in *Psychiatric Power* when he writes that paternal and medical power are diametrically opposed. Now he is making a new argument: rather than doctors being father-figures, parents have become doctor-figures. It is not the hospital that tries to create itself as a familial sphere, but the home that has become a clinical space. Nevertheless, Foucault stresses that this does not mean that parents have taken on the disciplinary power of doctors, but that they defer to it: "This also means that their control is subordinate, that it must be open to medical and hygienic intervention, and that they must call upon the external and scientific authority of the doctor at the first warning signs" (Foucault 1999/2004, 250). Foucault describes a scenario in which parents have the authority to decide whether their children will receive medical treatment for their "abnormal" conditions, but the decisions they make are thoroughly informed by the ways in which they have internalized medical norms: "All immediate power over the child's body . . . is given to this medicalized family that is, however, controlled externally by medical knowledge and techniques" (254).

Foucault traces the emergence of this new family to biopolitics. Although the worries about masturbation were a medically constructed fiction, the medical establishment used this crusade to get parents to pay attention to their children, and this, in the age of emerging biopower, in order to *keep them alive*. Doctors and the state wanted parents to pay attention to their children not because masturbation was actually lethal, but because parental attentiveness to their children's activities would lower childhood fatalities *from other causes*. It seems that parents had to be given a libidinal investment in their offspring for such attentiveness to occur (Foucault 1999/2004, 255). As Foucault states, "In my view, the sexuality of children concerns parents more than children" (258).³ Foucault's argument is that part of this new interest of parents in children was sexual, and that this libidinal investment was cultivated by doctors. While the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical crusade to urge mothers to nurse their children is well-documented in studies of childhood, Foucault describes a contemporary crusade on the part of the same doctors, one that also targeted middle-class mothers. Like the crusade against wet-nursing, the crusade against masturbation led to the expulsion of "intermediaries" and cultivated a more intimate parent-child bond, contributing to the formation of the bourgeois, cellular family.

What Foucault suggests is that parents transformed themselves from sovereigns into nurses in exchange for the sexual pleasures of this newly libidinal bond.

What was expected of parents in return for their libidinal pleasures was, however, exorbitant: parents were asked not only to attend to their children for the sake of the state, but also to give them up to the state for education and training:

The child's sexuality is the trick by which the close-knit, affective, substantial, and cellular family was constituted and from whose shelter the child was extracted. The sexuality of children was a trap into which parents fell. It is an evident trap; I mean, it is a real trap, but intended for parents. (Foucault 1999/2004, 257)

Children's sexuality is a trap for parents because by allowing themselves to be invested in it parents lost their grasp on sovereign power, becoming instruments of biopower who must eventually cede their children to the state.⁴ As Foucault sees it, "This is the great deception in which parental power has been caught. It is a fictional power whose fictional organization enabled the real constitution of this space to which one was so attached . . ." (258).

FEMINIST FOUCAULDIANS WRITE ON THE FAMILY

For the most part, feminist scholars inspired by Foucault have analyzed the family as an institution of discipline and biopower. In "Disciplining the Family" (Feder 1997) and *Family Bonds: Genealogies of Race and Gender* (Feder 2007b), Ellen K. Feder has described the ways in which disciplinary power is exercised both on and within the family. Children internalize an awareness that they are under the surveillance of their parents, asking, "What would my parents think?" and parents are conscious of their surveillance by neighbors, asking, "What will the neighbors think?" (Feder 2007b, 15, 41). Children conform to the expectations of their parents, and parents to the gazes of their neighbors, as well as to those of teachers, doctors, classmates, and the parents of classmates, whom they monitor in turn. Whereas gender is inculcated in the family through internal practices of discipline, Feder argues that the racialization of families occurs through the external pressures of biopower. Although in "Disciplining the Family" Feder describes ways in which the family is disciplined from without (by teachers, neighbors, doctors), in "The Dangerous Individual(s) Mother: Biopower, Family, and the Production of Race," she writes that discipline "can be understood as the power that circulates primarily within the institution [of the family], rather than a power that is imposed from without," whereas "Rather than working *within* the institution of the family, biopower works *upon* it" (Feder 2007a, 71).

Even as she argues that the family is, in its internal workings, a disciplinary institution, Feder acknowledges that the family is different from the disciplinary institutions that Foucault describes insofar as its roles are more fixed and

individuated, less reversible and reciprocal. Although one prison guard may be replaced by another without disrupting the smooth functioning of the prison, and although guards and prisoners are monitored alike, a mother is not so easily replaced by another mother, and the parent's and child's roles are not so easily interchanged. A prisoner or a guard may be transferred from one prison to another or even to an asylum without any real disruption, but the same is not true of transferring children or wives from one household to another. Feder calls her book *Family Bonds*, but Foucault points out that the kinds of bonds in which the family is entangled, involving property as well as personal and collective commitments, are in many ways closer to the conflictual and heterogeneous bonds of sovereignty than to discipline. Family bonds are in fact familial: they are intimate, they involve blood and birth and shared histories, which means that they are not reducible to the anonymous and interchangeable mechanisms of a disciplinary apparatus, however infiltrated by these they may be.

Jon Simons's original contribution has been to write on the practices of self-constitution entailed by mothering as an instance of the ethico-aesthetic technologies that Foucault studied at the end of his life. Although the activities that Foucault analyzed aimed at enhancing the autonomy of the self, Simons argues that mothering as a set of self-transformative practices aims to transform and develop the autonomy of others as well (Simons 1996).

In the tradition of Jacques Donzelot, Foucault's student and colleague as well as the author of *La police des familles* (Donzelot 1977/2005), two feminist sociologists have described the family through the lens of Foucault's analyses of power (Bell 1993; Knowles 1997). In *Family Boundaries: The Invention of Normality and Dangerousness*, Caroline Knowles focuses on the ways in which the family is monitored by disciplinary agencies such as social services and medicine. In *Interrogating Incest: Feminism, Foucault and the Law*, Vikki Bell considers the ways in which incest victims are controlled by their oppressors within the family.

Unlike any of the other feminist authors writing on the family from a Foucauldian perspective, Bell perceives the specifically sovereign aspects of familial power to which Foucault points, and of *paternal* power more specifically. Arguably, Foucault viewed the family as sovereign when he considered it as a patriarchal institution, and biopolitical when he considered maternal power or parental power more generally. In *Psychiatric Power*, when Foucault argues that the family is fundamentally sovereign, and although he does not make this explicit, he is clearly thinking of familial power exclusively as patriarchal and paternal and does not theorize the caretaking role of mothers at all. In contrast, in *The History of Sexuality*, having theorized biopower, Foucault considers the father to have "fallen" and concentrates on the kind of power that both parents, and especially mothers, exercise over their children in their role as caregivers. After all, and although he does not make this explicit either, when

Foucault says that nineteenth-century parents were told to watch over their children as they slept and bathed, to smell their clothes and scrutinize their sheets, it was mothers more than fathers who were so called upon. When Foucault writes about familial power in terms of such maternal care, he conceptualizes it as biopower, much as Simons has argued that biopower—which aims, like mothers, to keep subjects alive, healthy, productive, and normal, or is a nurturing type of power—targets women in particular, and has women as its primary agents (Simons 1996, 180, 191, 204). Not only do women have a privileged relation to biopower due to their procreative roles as mothers, but also in other caretaking and typically feminine roles such as nursing, teaching, family medicine, therapy, and social work. It is apt, then, that when Foucault considers the kind of power that mothers primarily exercise, he theorizes the family in terms of biopower rather than sovereignty.

Focusing on cases of incestuous abuse between father figures and female children, Bell thus aptly argues that it is the kind of unquestioning obedience with respect to their fathers with which children are inculcated that makes sexual abuse easy. “The power of the Father,” she writes, “is the power of ‘seizure,’ which Foucault identifies with juridico-discursive [sovereign] power” (Bell 1993, 61). In the literature on incest, the incestuous father is frequently compared to a lord or tyrant: he sees his home as his castle, and his victims as possessions over which he holds an absolute right. It is the tremendous patriarchal authority that such men wield in their houses that enables them to command the obedience and silence of their children and, often, their wives. Although in cases of incest this paternal authority is taken to an extreme and abused, Bell insists that it is not different *in kind* from the power that we accept in normal parent–child relations. Bell thus follows other feminists writing on incest by arguing that sexual abuse is not the sign of an abnormal family, but is a result of the traditional patriarchal family structure: the sovereign power an incestuous father wields is not of a different order from the power of other fathers, but is the exploitation of the kind of familial power that we routinely cultivate and accept. Despite this identification of the family’s sovereign element, Bell goes on to discuss the father’s lordly power over his children as simultaneously disciplinary, arguing that he monitors them and thus ensures their submission in a quasi-panoptic manner.

Most recently, in her Foucauldian genealogy of racism in the United States, Ladelle McWhorter has situated the emergence of the modern, nuclear family within the biopolitical context of the American eugenics movement. McWhorter sees this family as a novel and specifically modern creation and argues persuasively that contemporary pro-family and family values movements are in fact mere extensions of a normalizing American eugenics program that was itself prototypical of Nazi racism (McWhorter 2009, chap. 6). McWhorter, like Foucault in *Abnormal*, insists on a complete division between early family

forms and the biopolitical family of today. Whereas Foucault, in *Abnormal*, describes a new kind of family being born in the nineteenth century, McWhorter is describing an even more recent invention, also known as The Family, whose birth she dates to as late as the 1950s. This is when the American eugenics movement, discredited by Nazi eugenics, refashioned itself as the pro-family movement. Although during its heyday the American eugenics movement was able to sterilize and permanently incarcerate those deemed to be threats to the Nordic race, after World War II these same eugenicists took on the language of preserving and fostering “the Family” in order to achieve many of the same goals. Non-whites and non-heterosexuals continue to be targeted as dangers, but now they are spoken of not as threats to the white race but to “the Family.” According to McWhorter, and despite all the appeals to “tradition” this institution has inspired, the “Normal Family” is not a timeless and threatened entity, but rather a recent invention constituted and fostered by the neo-eugenic and biopolitical discourses of the postwar era.

A GENEALOGICAL APPROACH TO THE FAMILY

Although in his 1973–75 lectures, as indeed in *The History of Sexuality* and *Le désordre des familles*, Foucault does what Simons and Feder have criticized him for not doing—he considers the kind of power at work in the family in some detail—his combined accounts are unlikely to assuage concerns about his androcentrism on the part of some of his critics, especially if, like Simons, we were hoping to find a positive account of maternal power in Foucault’s works. In *Psychiatric Power* Foucault describes the family as a patriarchal institution in which the father alone wields power, and relegates mothers to the same de-individuated status as children within the familial sphere. In *The History of Sexuality* mothers are considered only insofar as their bodies are hysterized by medicine, even if, in *Psychiatric Power*, Foucault would refer to “the hysterics, those famous, dear hysterics,” as a “front of resistance” to disciplinary power (Foucault 2003/2006, 253). In *Abnormal*, mothers as well as fathers are described as exercising a normalizing power over their children—much as in *Le désordre des familles* women are shown to participate in the incarceration of their deviant family members—but this is as close to theorizing maternal power as Foucault ever comes and, contrary to Simons’s discussion, it is described as an entirely negative practice, thoroughly co-opted by the dictates of doctors.

Although, not surprisingly, we do not find a sustained consideration of the role of women in the family in Foucault’s work or a feminist analysis of any kind, what we do have—both in Foucault’s writings and in those of feminist scholars drawing on his work—are a number of fragments of a genealogy of this institution, and these should be read in much the same way that we read

Foucault's genealogy of other social institutions, such as the psychiatric hospital and the prison. That is, these fragments of a genealogy should be read as showing the family's novelty, its contingency, and, most importantly, its formation through power struggles. The family, like the prison and the asylum, does not exist because it needs to or because we have become so enlightened as to realize that it is the "best" way to deal with certain facts about human nature. Rather, it exists as it does as the result of power struggles in which certain people lost and whose histories of resistance have been forgotten.

McWhorter has written that she reads Foucault's genealogies for the same reason that she watches Arnold Schwarzenegger movies: "I wanted to see more things blow up" (McWhorter 1999, 62). Genealogies, for Foucault, aim to be destructive or, in his own words, are "made for cutting" (Foucault 1984, 88). They are counter-histories, written less to tell the "right" or final story than to debunk dominant histories of concepts, practices, or institutions that are either teleological or universalizing. In the case of the family, the story that is in need of debunking is perhaps most often a universalizing one: families, as cohabitating kinship units headed by male members of monogamous, procreative, heterosexual couples, are seen as quasi-natural formations, as indicated by the fact that they have allegedly sprung up everywhere since time immemorial. When variances in family forms *are* acknowledged, advocates may slip into a teleological version of history: admittedly, barbaric peoples, including some of our own uncivilized ancestors, did not insist on monogamy on the part of men, and treated women and children appallingly; however in its *current*, evolved form, the nuclear family is the bedrock of civilization. Whether the story is universalizing or teleological, the conclusion is the same: anyone who resists being part of such a family or who undermines its ruse of inevitability in the eyes of children must be abnormal and poses a threat to society. Such a person poses a danger to society against which society has the right to defend itself.

In contrast to this story of the family, what Foucault's, Feder's, McWhorter's, Knowles's, and Bell's studies of the family do well is not so much to tell the correct story of the family—a coherent, non-contradictory story, a story that can now never be contested—but to highlight the constructed and political nature of the familial institution and its abiding and shifting investments in power struggles. The family, these authors show, is a continually contested site where different technologies of power conflict but also, and perhaps more perniciously, collaborate.

The publication of most of Foucault's contributions to these fragments of a genealogy postdate the feminist-Foucauldian studies of the family mentioned above, with the notable exceptions of Feder's and McWhorter's books. Whereas McWhorter is clearly inspired by Foucault's account of the family in *The History of Sexuality* and *Abnormal*, Feder continues to deny that Foucault actually wrote on the family (Feder 2007b, 17, 40), even while objecting to his analysis of the family in *Psychiatric Power* in a footnote, calling his discussion

there a “failure” and a “contradiction” (108). Although she does not engage with his arguments from this lecture in any detail, what Feder objects to is Foucault’s description of the family as a sovereign institution, whereas she has described it as disciplinary and biopolitical. Feder goes on to call her study a “corrective” to Foucault’s failure to write about the family, and to write about it as a disciplinary institution in particular. What I have suggested in this paper, however, is not just that Foucault *did* write about the family, but, more importantly, that there is no “correct” answer to the question of what the family is or what kind of power characterizes it, and hence no need for a “corrective.” We should not be trying to discover the correct theory of the family, but to genealogize it. The purpose of this genealogy should be to engage in particular struggles—against incest, against neo-eugenics, against the workings of gender and racism within and upon the family—and this is precisely what all of the Foucauldian examinations of the family discussed in this paper do so well.

NOTES

1. Simons claims that Foucault’s emphasis on institutions such as the prison and the army indicates his preference for studying masculine rather than feminine forms of subjectification. Had Foucault been interested in female subject-formation and power, he might have considered the institution of the family rather than that of the army, and he might have studied the technologies of self-constitution that occur through mothering rather than those practiced by Hellenistic men. After all, the familial sphere is not the only place to which female subjects have frequently been confined and where they are primarily subjectified; it is also a site in which women exercise some power over the subjectification of others, particularly children. In *Family Bonds*, Feder states that Foucault “remarks upon—but did not develop—the role of the institution of the family” (Feder 2007b, 108). Although Foucault promised a future analysis of the family in *Discipline and Punish*, Feder writes that “this analysis was never to materialize” (17). Feder argues that Foucault not only neglected to write about the family but “obscures the extent to which Bentham’s formulation of the panoptic operation depends on a prior disciplinary institution that complexly delineates ‘the everyday life of men,’ namely, the family” (40).

2. Although at times Foucault seems literally to be referring to cases of incest, he also seems to refer to the family as “incestuous” as a shorthand and hyperbolic way of describing its new intimacy, affectivity, and libidinal investments. In his view, since it is increased supervision and attention to children as well as the shrinking and privatization of the familial realm that produces the “incestuousness” of the family, it would be mothers more than fathers (as the primary caretakers) who would be incestuous. However, since it is in fact fathers and other male relatives far more frequently than mothers who engage in sexual acts with children, and Foucault most likely knows this, I assume that his use of the term *incest* refers less to sexual activity itself and more generally to the production of close-knit relations and possessive, affective attachments. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers at *Hypatia* for drawing my attention to this point.

3. Indeed, histories of childhood indicate a relative lack of interest of parents in their children up until the period that Foucault describes. Some historians have argued that premodern parents did not bond with their children because, with good reason, they half-expected them to die. In a sort of vicious circle, this lack of parent–child bond contributed to the high mortality rates that inhibited parents from forging affective bonds in the first place. It was lower mortality rates in the modern era, brought about by a number of factors—fewer famines, the end of the plague, maternal nursing replacing wet-nursing, improved hygiene—that finally allowed parents to invest emotionally in their children, and this new investment contributed to lower mortality rates. See Ariès 1988; see also Duncan 1973; James 1997; Cunningham 2005, 2006.

4. According to Foucault, parents gain possession of their children’s sexual bodies in exchange for giving them up to the state. Therefore, he argues, these same parents resist sex education in the schools. The sexuality of their children is all that parents receive in return for their ceding of sovereign power, and so it comes hard to them to lose this sexuality too to disciplinary institutions outside the home. As Foucault paraphrases the parental objection to sexual education in the schools:

We have been deceived for two centuries! For two centuries we have been told: Give us your children and you can take care of their sexuality; give us your children, but you will guarantee that their sexuality will develop in a family space controlled by you. Give us your children, and your power over your children’s sexual body, over their body of pleasure, will be maintained. And now the psychoanalysts are saying: It’s ours, the body of pleasure is ours! And the State, psychologists, psychopathologists, and others say: It’s ours, this education is ours! (Foucault 1999/2004, 258)

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