

Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. I: The Will to Knowledge*

pp. 1-49

PHIL 449, Spring 2014

What are “discourses”?

These refer to particular groups of statements about a topic, unified by similar assumptions, patterns of speaking, accepted criteria for truth.

—e.g., discourses on sexuality can include psychoanalytic, medical, pedagogical, demographic

Sara Mills, *Michel Foucault*. Routledge Critical Thinkers Series. London and New York: Routledge, 2004

- “Discourses, or discursive formations, are groups of statements which deal with the same topic and which seem to produce a similar effect; for example, they may be groups of statements which are grouped together because of some institutional pressure or association, because of a similarity of origin, or because they have a similar function” (64).
- “Discourse does not simply translate reality into language; rather discourse should be seen as a system which structures the way that we perceive reality” (55).

An outline of the overall argument in HS 1

1. The usual story about the relationship between power, truth, and sex has been the “repressive hypothesis.”
 - since about the 17th century, sex has been repressed by power: silenced, reduced to a single form (3-4)
 - power operates on sex only negatively, by prohibiting, silencing, blocking (83-84)
 - we should liberate ourselves from sexual repression by allowing sex to be expressed, talked about (6-7); we should speak the truth of sex against power (6)
2. But repression can’t be the whole story, b/c rather than silence re: sex, there was a “discursive explosion” around sex (17), “a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex” (18)
 - there has been a proliferation of sexualities rather than a reduction to a single form (Part 2 Chpt. 2, “The Perverse Implantation”)
 - these discourses about sex include a *scientia sexualis* that connects confessional techniques to scientific norms, and that makes of sexuality “a mode of specification of individuals” (47)
 - There has been a “will to truth” about sex and sexuality, a will to generate scientific knowledge about sexuality (77-79)
3. Foucault links the proliferation of discourses on sex and the development of a *scientia sexualis* to a form of power that is on the rise around the end of the 18th century: “bio-power” (mostly discussed in the last chapter).
4. Why has the repressive hypothesis come to be such a well-accepted story, if it doesn’t really fit what

has been happening? It is the mask that makes bio-power tolerable, and that allows it to proliferate (34-35, 80, 86)

5. Therefore, accepting the “repressive hypothesis” and trying to express one’s individual, “true” sexuality against repression doesn’t resist “bio-power,” but instead supports and promotes it.

(part 2, above) Repression of sex can’t be the whole story, b/c rather than silence re: sex, there was a “discursive explosion” around sex (17), “a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex” (18)

A. Examples:

- studies of populations: marriage rates, birth and death rates, legitimate and illegitimate births (25-26)
- sexuality of children, concerns about masturbation (27-28)
- hysteria in women (104-105)
- study and categorization of “abnormal” or “unnatural” sexualities: the “perversions” (39-41, 43)
- criminal justice: the “farmhand” story (31)

As with the spread of disciplinary mechanisms, these discourses on sex sprang from different institutions, had different purposes (33)

B. Confession and the *scientia sexualis*

1. religious confession in Catholicism after mid 16th century moved from discussion of sexual acts to discussion of thoughts, desires, dreams, fantasies, etc. (19-20)

— “It is no longer a question of saying what was done--the sexual act--and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that recapitulated it, the obsessions that accompanied it, the images, desires, modulations, and quality of the pleasure that animated it” (63).

2. The spread of confessional techniques re: sex:

- a. confession in literature in 18th & 19th centuries: Sade; also anonymous *My Secret Life* (21-22)
- b. becomes part of medical, psychological, psychoanalytic studies of sex (65-67; discuss this next week)
- c. “We have since become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide.” (59)

C. But could we say that the explosion of discourses about sex is due to the fact of widespread repression?

- Foucault: actually, speaking of sex as something outside of and held down by a power that acts negatively, to repress, and saying we need to liberate our sex from that power *contributes to another form of power that incites us to speak about it*

-- *this other form of power, as we'll see, Foucault calls "bio-power"*

-- "... this oft-stated theme, that sex is outside of discourse and that only the removing of an obstacle, the breaking of a secret, can clear the way leading to it, is precisely what needs to be examined. Does it not partake of the injunction by which discourse is provoked?" (34; next sentence is good too)

Repressive power: laws,
customs, morals

Repress, silence,
reduce to a single
form (heterosexual
couple)

Sex, sexuality as
"natural," as outside
power & discourse

This

whole picture
sex, to develop
liberate it.

-- though there are other forces leading to increasing discourses

D. Rather than sexuality being reduced to one form, a multiplicity generated

-- increase in study of "perversions," peripheral

-- the "pervert" becomes a type of person similar to how the "delinquent" does in penal practices

-- sexuality is "incorporate[d] into individuals," becoming "deeply characteristic of individuals" (44)—our sexuality becomes crucial to who we are

-- e.g., "As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; The nineteenth century homosexual became 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 a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality" (43).

This is harmful, so
we need to liberate
ourselves from
repressive power

encourages us to speak about
discourses to study it & to

about sex too, as we'll see...

of sexualities has been

sexualities

How much do we still see this today, that who one is is deeply tied to their sexuality?