

Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*
pp. 115-159
PHIL 449, Spring 2014

What underlies the explosion of discourses on sex starting around the 18th century?

Why do we have such a strong “will to truth” regarding sex? (79)

1. In part b/c it provides pleasure

-- spirals of power and pleasure (45)

-- we have invented a new kind of pleasure: “pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open—the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure” (71).

2. also because of concerns about health and strength of populations

a. concerns about heredity, degenerescence; eugenics movements (e.g. restricting who could get married—no interracial marriages, no insane persons, no “feebleminded” or “idiots”; forced sterilizations)

b. concerns about the integrity of the race of a population being reduced through immigration

c. state-directed racism (119)

-- the population, the people as a kind of race, who need to be biologically protected from within and without

-- the above practices, insofar as guided by governments, would count as “state-directed racism”

3. sex and class relations: the deployment of sexuality began with the “upper classes” (“bourgeois” or “aristocratic”) (120)

a. ruling classes wanted to maximize their own life, health, vigor, a good line of descendents

-- “the most rigorous techniques were formed and, more particularly, applied first, with the greatest intensity, in the economically privileged and politically dominant classes” (120)

-- “it was a question of techniques for maximizing life. The primary concern was not repression of the sex of the classes to be exploited, but rather the body, vigor, longevity, progeniture, and descent of the classes that ‘ruled’” (123)

b. at first, the ruling classes weren’t concerned about sexual practices in working classes

-- “The living conditions that were dealt to the proletariat, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, show there was anything but concern for its body and sex: it was of little

importance whether *those* people lived or died, since their reproduction was something that took care of itself anyway” (126)

c. though later, deployment of sexual controls was extended to working classes, to help deal with public health issues, ensure production of an adequate and docile working force, etc. (126)

4. origins of the theory of repression (128-130)

a. the dominant classes wanted to continue to set their sexuality apart; when the deployment of sexuality, the continuing discussion and codifying it in a scientific, therapeutic discourse extended beyond them to the proletariat, they needed a way to continue to set themselves apart

-- our sexuality is “subjected to a regime of repression so intense as to present a constant danger; ... if it carries with it so many dangers, this is because ... we have too long reduced it to silence” (128-129)

b. psychoanalysis emerges as a “technique for relieving the effects of the taboo where its rigor makes it pathogenic” (129)

-- psychoanalysis is part of the general deployment of sexuality [through bio-power] (129, 159)

— and it is something that early on only the upper classes had access to

— “Those who had lost the exclusive privilege of worrying over their sexuality henceforth had the privilege of experiencing more than others the thing that prohibited it and of possessing the method which made it possible to remove the repression” (130).

Part V: “Right of Death and Power Over Life”

Bio-power: what is it?

1. A type of power relation that works to promote, foster, manage life itself

a. contrast to older views of sovereign power, which involves “the right to *take* life or *let* live”
-- in French original: “le droit de *faire mourir* ou de *laisser vivre*” (178): the right to *make* die or *let* live

-- “The sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing” (136)

b. bio power is “a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (138)

-- at the end of *Society Must Be Defended* lecture course, he says it is a power to “make live and let die”

-- “a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (136)

-- “a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (137)

2. operates through norms more than through rules/laws (144)

-- not a matter of saying what is permitted/forbidden so much as generating norms, hierarchizing, classifying, distributing individuals around those norms

3. bio-power and disciplinary power

a. disciplinary power focused on separating, distributing, observing and documenting *individuals*, controlling bodies to increase their utility and docility (139)

-- an “*anatomo-politics of the human body*” (139)

b. “*a bio-politics of the population*”: power relations that address humans *en masse*, at the level of populations

-- focused on the “species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity...” (139)

-- end of *Society Must be Defended* lecture course: this sort of power “is addressed to a multiplicity of men, ... to the extent that they form ... a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on” (242-243)—it deals with an entity called a “population” (245)

— include “forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures,” and the point is not to intervene in any particular individual’s life, exactly, as to “to intervene at the level at which these general phenomena are determined, to intervene at the level of their generality” (Ibid., 246)

c. disciplinary mechanisms and bio-politics of the population are both part of “bio-power” (139-140)

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.

1. thinking of power just as repression hides what else is going on with power relations and sex

-- see, e.g., p. 80, 86

2. speaking of sex as repressed encourages us to continue to talk about it and engage in scientific study of it; provides the data needed for scientia sexualis and bio-power

-- pp. 34-35, 60

3. We feel powerful and rebellious when speaking about sexual liberation against repression (6-7)

Conclusion: 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.

1. Foucault has already argued that “sexuality” is not some natural aspect of ourselves outside of power and discourse (68, 105)

2. But what about “sex” itself? (152-153)

a. isn’t there some biological substrate to sex, something “underneath” power?

b. Foucault: sex itself is produced through the deployment of sexuality

-- *how might this be the case?*

Discussion

We see many versions of sexual activities in media, internet, and these may affect us in subtle ways when we engage in sex.

Some argue that pornography has greatly affected the way people think sex is supposed to be.

3. “liberating” our sex or sexuality from repression won’t undermine the workings of bio-power

“This whole sexual ‘revolution,’ this whole ‘antirepressive’ struggle, represented nothing more, but nothing less—and its importance is undeniable—than a tactical shift and reversal in the great deployment of sexuality. But it is also apparent why one could not expect this critique to be ... the basis for a movement to dismantle it” (131).

-- “We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality” (157).

-- “...what we now perceive as the chronicle of a censorship and the difficult struggle to remove it will be seen [by those in the future] rather as the centuries-long rise of a complex deployment for compelling sex to speak, for fastening our attention and concern up on sex ...” (158)

Are we left with any indirect suggestions in the text for alternative ways to think about sexual activities and pleasures?

Somehow we need an authentic discourse about sexuality, but it’s not clear exactly what that should be.

Do we not talk about it, study it anymore? Separate our identities from sexuality, perhaps.

Can we think differently? How we conceive of sex is so shaped by dominant discourses that if we are “free” to think and act differently, we’ll still end up copying each other. Conformity seems hardwired in the brain.

-- The idea is not to get to the point where anything goes, but our sexual practices need to also be shared practices with others; there need to be certain shared rules.