

Presentation on Foucault's *History of Sexuality Volume I*, pp. 53-102

PHIL 449, Spring 2014

Started with a video clip from *V for Vendetta*: Valerie writing a letter on toilet paper while in a prison, telling the story of her love affairs and how they wound her up in prison.

-- Presenter: take note of what narrative is being displayed about power.

Summary of key concepts in parts 1 and 2 of the text

- Foucault rejects the idea that the repressive hypothesis explains well, by itself, the relationship between power and sexuality
- Rather, there is a discourse being created around sexuality that links our identities to our sexuality and that leads us to mediate sexual pleasure through knowledge
 - this works to power's advantage: we become habituated to think of sex through the medium of scientific knowledge

Summary of key concepts in part 3

- Sexuality as truth—sexuality becomes a discourse about truth (54). It is truth that serves as a medium for sex and its manifestations (61)
- Sexuality becomes scientific: Through confession, we pass sexuality through an authority figure and knowledge is created thereby
 - we also become habituated to find pleasure in this process of telling the truth about sexuality, so that pleasure and knowledge become linked
 - sexuality is supposed to tell us our truth, but now interpretation of that truth belongs to the priest, the doctor, or the internet—so normalization is involved. We now depend on such masters for guidance in terms of sexuality.

Key concepts in part 4

- Juridical notion of power (86): we think of power only as a uniform, negative force that prohibits or censors through rules
 - but power is also positive, it creates things; through power relations we create discourse and engage in normalization
 - to think of it as only negative allows the positive workings of power to stay hidden
- example of power's positive mechanisms: children's masturbation
 - in all the worry surrounding masturbation in children, all the attempts to stop it, what also happened is that new power relations were formed between parents and children, doctors and families. There were new ways for power relations to form through these efforts (113)

Foucault's optimism

- Seems to express some optimism about changing power relations re: sexuality near the end of part 4 when he says discourse can both support and resist power relations—e.g., homosexuality engaging in “reverse discourse” (101)
- In the interview entitled “Power and Sex” (optional reading), Foucault talks about subverting power by taking discourses that have already been created about sexual identities and attaching new predicates

to one or more identities—e.g., homosexuals or women accept their identities as created by discourses and attach new values to those designations (“Power and Sex” 115).

Concerns about “reverse discourse”

- But I have a concern about the sort of strategy discussed above: “By assembling discourse through the mouths of authority (including but not limited to priests, doctors, and specialists) one sabotages their chance of attaining liberation through this discourse. That is to say, discourse itself has become corrupted by surfacing in the interpretation of the oppressor.” (quote from slide)
- Nietzsche on discourse (quotes from slide)
 - “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions--they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins (4). “On Truth, Lie & Extra Moral Sense”
 - “The right of the lords to give names goes so far that we should allow ourselves to comprehend the origin of language as an expression of power on the part of those who rule: they say “this *is* such and such,” they seal each thing and happening with a sound and thus, as it were, take possession of it (11).” “On the Genealogy of Morals”
 - Nietzsche here notes that we forgot how our creations become reified as truths, and that they are created and reified through the powerful.
- Audrey Lorde, from “Sister Outsider”
 - “For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change (2).”
 - Lorde is arguing that we can't do meaningful damage to the master using his own discourse; meaningful transformation is impossible using his own categories
- quote from Anthony Appiah (from where?)
 - “An American homosexual after Stonewall and gay liberation takes the old script of self-hatred, the script of the closet, the script in which he is a faggot, and works, in community with others, to construct a series of positive gay life-scripts. In these life- scripts, being homosexual, is recorded as being gay, and this requires, among other things, refusing to stay in the closet. And if one is to be out of the closet in a society that deprives homosexuals of equal dignity and respect then one has to deal constantly with assaults on one's dignity. In this context, the right to live as an “open homosexual” will not be enough. It will not even be enough to be treated with equal dignity despite being homosexual, for that will require a concession that being homosexual counts naturally or to some degree against one's dignity. And so one will end up asking to be respected *as a homosexual*. [...] Demanding respect for people as blacks and as gays requires that there are some scripts that go with being an African- American or having same-sex desires. There will be proper ways of being black and gay, there will be expectations to be met, demands will be made.”
 - If you come out of the closet, you have to find respect *as* a homosexual, using the identity that has already been created for that category. We have to use certain life scripts to go forward in our lives.
 - e.g., Jane Elliott's famous experiment with schoolchildren: she separated them into groups with different eye colours. This, like skin colour or sexuality, is an arbitrary way to categorize people, but once they were broken up into such groups the kids identified with those categories and used them.

- quote from interview with Foucault called “Power and Sex”: “This type of discourse is, indeed, a formidable tool of control and power. As always it uses what people say, feel and hope for. It exploits their temptation to believe that to be happy, it is enough to cross the threshold of discourse and to remove a few prohibitions. But in fact it ends up repressing and dispersing movements of revolt and liberation...” (114).
 - Through discourse we problematize sexuality, but we have to return to the same discourse to solve these problems

Back to the clip from *V for Vendetta*

There is repression going on in that society, certainly, but that’s not all; there are also discourses, knowledges, normalization, control. We’ve advanced in our society against repression and misery, but not against these other things.

Questions

1. It is clear that Foucault sees us as “entrenched” in a power relationship centered around discourse, yet he also seems to offer some optimism for our liberation. Can discourse liberate us? If so, how?

Discussion of #1

- Yes, though discourse also oppresses through determining what counts for truth. But oppression itself empowers the oppressed because they then associate with each other, and can create their own discourses and knowledges.
 - Wouldn’t this mean oppression is acceptable b/c through that they can liberate themselves?
 - It’s also the case that within oppressed groups, there are hierarchies, internal oppressions as well.
 - I don’t think we can resist through using the same discourse. The institutions, knowledges, discourses that create individual identities given us a “mark,” or a life script, and resisting those using that very mark itself seems like it won’t work.
 - [Presenter] It’s actually quite sad to think about how we are marked by power relations in this way. What if I never wanted my skin colour or gender to be a life script I have to live out? But yet I still have to.
 - What might Nietzsche say about constructing values on the basis of negating the “master’s tools,” given what he criticizes about the slave values being created merely out of negating the masters’ values?
 - [Presenter] The slaves never put themselves in the position of power, though, really; they got the ability to make the masters feel guilty, but they weren’t fully able to overturn the power relation. Can we imagine a space where new discourses are created that don’t depend on discourses of the master?
- 2. If Foucault were to have viewed Valerie's Letter in V for Vendetta, where do you think he would locate the positive effects of power? When we, as an audience, view Valerie's story, in what way can we see the strategies of power at play?*

3. *Pierre Trudeau's Omnibus Bill is considered as a momentous achievement in Canadian history. He famously said, "There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation." Although there is no denying that this bill has lessened what Foucault calls the "miseries of sexuality," has it in any way subverted dominant powers?*

Discussion of #3

- One could argue that allowing same-sex marriage doesn't really change dominant powers in a deep way in the sense that it brings same-sex couples onto the same, dominant marriage "grid"
-- [Presenter:] yes, we can think we're moving towards liberation, but we're spreading dominant forms of control.