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ADVERSARIA

Commentaries, Remarks, and Notes Pertaining to Sex Research

THE APPARATUS OF SEXUALITY: REFLECTIONS ON FOUCAULT'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF SEX IN HISTORY

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In a 1979 review of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* for *The American Historical Review* (1978/1980a; French publication, 1976), Gilbert stated that Foucault's slender volume "has dramatically changed the field of sexual history" (p. 1020). This was a substantial claim for a field which Bullough (1972) just a few years earlier had characterized as "virgin" territory. It is a claim worth considering, given the wealth of analysis and interpretation which has commenced since that review concerning the Foucauldian point of view on the history of sexuality. To this end, I will summarize *Volume 1* and critical reaction to it as prelude to discussing Foucault's contributions to the study of sex in history.

Foucault held the Chair of the History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France at the time of his death in 1984. *Volume 1* was the introduction to a planned six-volume history of sexuality in Western civilization. As Foucault said: "It [*Volume 1*] does not have the function of a proof. It exists as a sort of prelude to explore the keyboard, sketch out the themes and see how people react" (1980b, p. 193). Three more books in the series were completed, but they reflect a substantial shift in direction resulting in a break between this book and the rest of the project. Foucault's history is radically different from conventional historical studies on sexuality, for it is not a narrative or social history of sexual behaviors, representations, or societies and their ideologies about sex. Rather, his approach, conceptualized in an opaque vocabulary defying easy translation into capsule definitions, is based on a rejection of conventional conceptions of history as focused on influences, traditions, causes, and continuities as well as on a rejection of accepted historiographical methods (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Megill, 1979). He seeks to go beyond the limits of history and philosophy to deal with how fields of knowledge are structured (Major-Poetzl, 1983) and presents an analysis of power substantially different from liberal-humanist approaches separating power and knowledge and

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Marxian class-based approaches. In fact, according to Foucault, "the whole point of the project [on sexuality] lies in a re-elaboration of a theory of power" (1980b, p. 187). Philosophical history, which dispenses with notions, central to subjectivist philosophies, of the subject as the creator and bearer of historical continuity, is used to show "how the subject is 'created' by power-knowledge complexes of history" (Shiner, 1982, p. 387).

Summary of Volume 1

Foucault treats sexuality as a modern historical construction and creation of discourse. Its history must, he argues, "be written from the viewpoint of a history of discourses" (Foucault, 1980a, p. 69) which constructed it. Discourse, a key concept used to overcome the subject-object and theory-practice dichotomies, refers to organized bodies of knowledge conjoined with practice (e.g., psychiatry, psychology, the human sciences) which produce and transmit power. Why, he asks, has the history of sexuality heretofore generally been written as a history of repression? Why has sexuality emerged in the modern age as something which is so widely and incessantly discussed? Why has it become central to individuals' definitions of themselves? Why has it become a central bearer of power relations, and what is the relationship of the new knowledges of sexuality to sexual liberation? The central aim is not to determine whether these discourses formulate the truth of sex but "to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said" (p. 11). He is interested in the apparatus (*dispositif*) of sexuality—sexuality as an archeological object and mechanism of domination.

Foucault begins by recounting the history of sexuality according to "the repressive hypothesis." His discussion is directed primarily to ideas of radical social theorists, like Reich and Marcuse, who made sexuality a central issue in their syntheses of Freud and Marx. The repressive hypothesis holds that, beginning in the 17th century and following a period of relative openness about sexual matters, they were increasingly subjected to forces of prohibition, censorship, denial, and nonrecognition. At the personal level, repressive power acted negatively on sexuality. At the social level, the onset of repression neatly coincided with the development of industrial, capitalist society. It was necessary, so the theory in various versions goes (see Poster, 1984), because of the incompatibility of a freer sexuality with an intensive work imperative and the necessity to divert energy to productive labor. After repression reached its zenith with the Victorian bourgeoisie, sex was gradually released from such rigid societal constraints. Subsequent historical records reveal how science began to uncover social and biological facts, thereby providing a basis for liberation from myths, taboos, and fears. Foucault does not deny the repressive hypothesis, at least in some aspects; instead, he goes beyond it to speak of a larger dynamic. The power bearing on sexuality—power as law and prohibition—has not been most significantly negative. At the root of the apparatus of sexuality is positive power. Thus, he is interested in the great multiplication of discourses concerning sexuality which has taken place since the 17th century. "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum* while exploiting it as the secret" (p. 35).

Foucault then analyzes the development of *scientia sexualis* as a mechanism for producing the proliferation of discourses on sex based on truth-value (which is not to say he is assessing the truth or falsity of such discourses) and contrasts *scientia sexualis* with *ars erotica.* Whereas the latter draws the truth of pleasure from pleasure garnered through accumulated experience and has been important in oriental civilizations, the former draws on methods of observation and demonstration. According to Foucault, the growth of scientific discourses depended on adaptation and transformation of confessional techniques from religious to secular forms. He argues that the newer forms of confession, appearing in medical and psychoanalytic examinations, judicial processes, education, and—by implication—researchers' interviews and surveys, "became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth" (p. 59). As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) point out, the assumption that truth can emerge from self-examination and self-disclosure is so ingrained that it seems almost unreasonable to instead consider discourses based on them as a central component of a power strategy.

The last half of *Volume 1* develops Foucault's central thesis that sexuality became a key way of controlling individuals and populations. He outlines what objects (domains) were constructed in the emerging discourses and how new forms of knowledge regarding sex operated in terms of power. Domains encompass the construction and establishment of diverse sexualities, the implementation of an entire sexual mosaic where none had existed. Major elements of this mosaic, created in the late 18th and 19th centuries, centered on "a hysterization of women's bodies," "a pedagogization of children's sex," "a socialization of procreative behavior," and "a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure" (pp. 104-105). New categories emerged to shape new identities. For example, sodomy, defined as an illicit act in religious-juridicial discourses, was displaced, in psycho-medical discourses, by the condition of homosexuality.

Knowledge established in the human science disciplines, including *scientia sexualis,* is not objective and external to the operation of power but intimately linked with it for the human sciences "which seek to improve the human condition through liberal values . . . are themselves inextricably expressions of domination; they seek to know in order to organize" (Turner, 1984, p. 158). Power and knowledge are not separate but intimately linked together. Foucault uses the concept of bio-power, power as it penetrates and disciplines individual and social bodies, to denote this quintessential modern form of power-knowledge (*pouvoir-savoir*) which objectifies while simultaneously creating subjectivities. Bio-power is *productive* as well as repressive and operates in a sideways fashion in all social relations. The repressive hypothesis, which conceives of power as negative and flowing downward, hides the facts of power as it really operates. As he puts it at the end of the book: "The irony of this deployment [of sexuality] is in having us believe that our 'liberation' is in the balance" (p. 159).

Foucault presented a controversial and provocative analysis but one which is hard to follow given idiosyncratic language and a difficult style. As Goldstein (1984) points out, however, unconventional language and style are central to his philosophical history and critique against the existing "order of

things" (e.g., the twofold meaning of discipline as a branch of knowledge and a mode of social control). Language and style facilitate deconstruction because they do not promote a concrete image of history (deconstruction is a post-structuralist strategy for critically reading texts, which undermines the idea that an objective meaning inheres in texts by exposing contradictions contained in them). Moreover, his book is not easily assimilated into the reader's framework, for he worked at the margins of several disciplines forging a de-disciplinary rather than interdisciplinary scholarship (Goldstein). Although acknowledging many influences, especially that of Nietzsche, he eschewed identification with disciplines or methods others used to characterize his work, for example, semiotics, hermeneutics, Marxism, structuralism, positivism, or phenomenology (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983).

Critical Reaction to Foucault

Apart from numerous reviews of his individual books, including over two dozen on *Volume 1,* critical reaction to Foucault in the U.S. has been established principally by historians and philosophers who, it should be noted, have not evaluated his arguments through comparison with other sexual histories or sexological studies.

A number of book-length studies (e.g., Cousins & Hussain, 1984; Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Major-Poetzl, 1983; Minson, 1985; and Poster, 1984) have assessed Foucault's ideas, including those on sexuality, located him in relation to other theoretical work, and argued his importance to creating fresh methods for developing theory in the human sciences. These are largely sympathetic though not uncritical appraisals. Thus, Major-Poetzl compares his approach to field theory in modern physics and wonders if it "might actually be the first step in the formation of a new science of history" (p. ix). Dreyfus and Rabinow characterize his work as "the most important contemporary effort" (p. xvii) in developing a new method in the human sciences. And Poster argues his later histories point the way to a refurbishing of Maxist theory along cultural lines focused on a new social formation called the mode of information (as distinct from the mode of production). Others have dealt with his discussions on the poverty of historicism; his rejection of totalizing theories like psychoanalysis and Marxism (though some see his own work as totalizing); his critique of liberal, Marxist, and Freudian inspired analyses of power (Hiley, 1984; Shiner, 1982); his new ground of history, a "history of the present" (Roth, 1981); his analysis of modern society as one of increasing surveillance, discipline, and control through the operation of bio-power; and his questioning of any simple notion of social or sexual liberation (Weeks, 1981, 1985). Weeks, who has written extensively on sexuality, argues that *Volume 1* is a significant contribution to the anti-essentialist ways of thinking about sex given initial impetus by those applying symbolic interactionist ideas to the realm of sexuality (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Plummer, 1975).

Megill (1979), who contends that many conventional historians have ignored or dismissed Foucault, also claims *Volume 1* is his most inferior book. He presents a detailed argument on why Foucault should not be taken seriously

as a historian of the past but should be taken very seriously as a contributor to the present crisis of historical consciousness. Both Marxist and conventional historians have accused him of being antirational as well as ahistorical or anti-historical. His denial of human agency and human nature puts him at odds with those who begin with a creating, interpreting subject or who assume a human nature (e.g., existential philosophers, Marxist humanists, or symbolic interactionists). Though admirers have hailed his analysis of power, detractors argue it is ambiguous, and Hiley (1984) characterizes Foucault's position as one which offers political engagement without liberal hope or comfort.

Foucault's Contributions to the Study of Sex in History

The subject of sex in history may have been "virgin" territory in 1972, but things have changed, and historical studies on sexuality have mushroomed in the late 1970s and 1980s. Many interesting studies, done with conventional and new historiographical techniques, have made significant contributions. For example, several revisionist studies of the Victorian period have produced a more complex picture of Victorian sexuality, especially female sexuality, than that which prevailed in the early 1970s (Stearns & Stearns, 1985). Certainly this large body of work is changing the field of sexual history where history is conceptualized as discovering the past in relation to sex. At the same time I agree with Gilbert (1979) that Foucault's *Volume 1* has dramatically changed the field, for in addition to its contribution to anti-essentialist ways of thinking about sex, it sets forth a provocative theoretical and historical perspective which has implications for all of sexology. His approach, attempting to break down the givens with which so much history and social science begin and to isolate characteristic forms through which power operates in modern society (Flynn, 1981; Minson, 1985), raises important issues concerning philosophies of history and science in relation to sexology. It can stimulate sexologists to take a critical look at the dominant positivist image of science characterizing so much work in the field, at the liberal-humanist assumptions shared by many working in it, and at the impacts as well as ends of sexology. Because Foucault has had considerable impact on work dealing with sexuality in (some) feminist and leftist intellectual traditions, I believe *Volume 1* can also encourage sexologists to examine critically contributions of those working within these traditions.

Although the issue of sexuality has been central for feminist scholars, the intellectual left, with its concern for labor and the mode of production, has paid relatively little attention to sexuality. And until Foucault, the repressive hypothesis, which posits a natural or essential sexuality repressed through societal constraints, was assumed by many working within these traditions. But the Foucauldian model has been important in opening up new ways of thinking about sex and power. According to the feminist scholar Rubin (1984), his history has been the most influential and emblematic text for what she calls "the new scholarship on sex" (p. 276). Despite its considerable theoretical variability, this scholarship generally shares the social constructionist contention that subjectivity, gender, identity, and sexuality exist primarily through language and representation. Briefly put, constructionism draws on a radical epistemology espoused in the history and philosophy of science which rejects a

correspondence theory of meaning and truth. It has grown out of the increasing critique of processes and products of positivist social science and is based on an alternative scientific metatheory asking "one to suspend belief that commonly accepted categories of understanding receive their warrant through observation" (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). Social constructionism casts doubt on the world as objective reality and consequently on objective truth warrants. It "views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal knowledge" (Gergen, p. 266) and is fundamentally concerned with processes by which people come to explain and account for their world. Psychological mechanisms and processes are derived from *historically specific* situations and not vice versa.

Much of this scholarship is directed to providing deconstructing and demystifying analyses, to explicating the development of gender and sexuality within capitalist social formations, to developing social theory which takes account of sexuality, and to articulating political strategies for resistance and change. It includes work of feminist and socialist-feminist theorists and researchers from many disciplines who are interested in women's oppression and how females become gendered and sexualized subjects (see, for example, Ross & Rapp, 1981; Rubin, 1984; and collections like *Powers of Desire,* Snitow, Stansell, & Thompson, 1983; and *Pleasure and Danger,* Vance, 1984). It includes the work of a number of historians and historically minded sociologists on the intellectual left who are concerned with how and why "perverse" sexualities are created and regulated and with developing social theory which brings issues of sexuality and the body to a position of centrality (see, for example, Padgug, 1979; Turner, 1984; and Weeks, 1981, 1985). Although Turner (1984) and Weeks (1981, 1985) in particular offer interpretations of the body and society and modern sexualities, respectively, interpretations which owe a great debt to Foucault, not all of these authors attempt to rigorously apply his model. There are, however, many points of commonality between his focus and methods and theirs.

Much of the "new" scholarship is based on an eclectic approach which combines elements from Marxist theory, semiotics, structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and poststructuralist thought. It should be noted that several of these ideas grew out of and are central to recent trends in philosophy and literary theory (see Eagleton, 1983). Those working in these traditions find much that is useful in Foucault, including his analysis of modern society as one characterized by increasing surveillance and control through the apparatus of sexuality; his refusal to accept the idea of objective knowledge or a split between theory, research, and practice in the human sciences; and his constructionist view of history and anti-essentialist view of sex. However, they find elements that are problematic as well, especially his denial of human agency and the pessimistic political position which frustrates attempts to define strategies for achieving greater human freedom.

To date, the ideas spelled out in Foucault's history of sexuality receive little more than a passing reference when cited in mainstream sexological research. The extent to which elements of his approach will be adapted and used as tools by those conducting more conventional historical and social scientific studies on sexuality remains to be seen. Goldstein (1984), acknowledging the difficulty

of determining whether Foucault would approve of such adaptation and extention but also its inevitability, provides an intriguing comparison of the sociological theory of professions with Foucault's analysis of disciplines, a comparison which could be utilized by researchers investigating the history of sexology. But it is also possible that mainstream sexologists will tend to see Foucault's work as primarily ideological or as an attack on sexology. Although *Volume 1* has certainly influenced recent critiques on aspects of sexology (e.g., Diorio, 1985; Weeks, 1985) and will undoubtedly spur more, such critiques should not be taken as indicative of an antisexology stance. Foucault would probably respond to charges of being antisexology in the same way he responded to charges of being antipsychiatry, precipitated as a consequence of his earlier work, by pointing out he was doing archeological and genealogical history (Foucault, 1980b). His work does not supersede or supplant other histories of sex and sexuality. Rather, his history stands alongside other work. If he "poses a philosophical challenge to history, it is not to question the reality of "the past" but to interrogate the rationality of the 'present'" (Gordon, 1980, p. 242).

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ON HAVING ONE'S RESEARCH SEIZED

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To my knowledge, Ernest Borneman (1984) is the only one thus far to have made any mention of being arrested in the course of conducting research on children's sexuality or adult-child sexual relationships. Actual arrest of researchers is rare in the history of sexology, although ridicule, harassment, job loss, and violence have been all too common. Some recently documented examples include that of psychologist John Watson, who was purged from Johns Hopkins for his "unorthodox" sex research (Magoun, 1981), and of Max Meyer, whose career at the University of Missouri was ruined by academic officials and inflamatory news reports (Esper, 1967; Magoun).

The difficulties experienced by Kinsey and his associates which were brought on by colleagues, legislators, and the press are well known. I have also learned that in the mid-1950s, the FBI approached Kinsey wanting him to reveal to them his sources of sexually explicit materials. Kinsey and Wardell

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