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Delineating Discourses in Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction*,  
*Volume 1*

The aim of this presentation will be to delineate Michel Foucault's arguments and provide critical analysis of his work *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction, Volume 1*. To supplement my reading of Foucault, I will be referencing the theories of Jean Baudrillard, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Hayden White.

Based on some quick research, a persistent entry common to every biography of Foucault is his position which describes himself as "a specialist in the history of systems of thought." As such, according to said classification, Foucault's project is to explore, even delineate, systems of epistemological nomenclatures, which he argues are all products of discourses of power. Immediately, this diverts the focus from him being concerned with accurately [re]presenting and mapping the past, as opposed to trying to understand the reasons why history happened.

An obvious influence on Foucault's work is Friedrich Nietzsche. Foucault adopts Nietzsche's technique of genealogy which suggests that the search for knowledge is also an expression of a will to power over other people. Genealogy questions the traditional foundations of history and disrupts history's apparent continuity by focusing the premise that knowledge is always rooted in power, and seeks to deny its own origins. If there be any observable "truth," it lies in the enactment of the discourse, and the only statements that can be viably made are based on the observations of said discourse itself, not of

being, essence, Truth. Therefore, a genealogical study of sex does not look forward to the liberation of some repressed essence but rather to a liberation from the categories and shackles of sexual discourse.

Nietzsche was a profound skeptic and there are traces of said skepticism in Foucault's work. Everything is open to suspicion because human beings continually delude themselves into believing that they have knowledge when they don't. There is no "truth." I believe that Foucault would argue that any quest to find, or demystify a truth is just another discourse which purports to make statements about it. Any knowledge derived from any discourse is a knowledge based on said discourse. As Nietzsche describes, there is no such thing as human knowledge, and that 'truth' is either unreachable or worse, a myth. As such, this statement provides a pertinent segue to discussing Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction, Volume 1*.

Historical accuracy is almost a contradiction in terms. If Hayden White has taught us anything, it's that history is as much a narrative construction as fiction. Foucault begins *The History of Sexuality: an Introduction, Volume 1* with a chapter titled "The 'other Victorians.'" The first few lines of this chapter echo and resonate, to me, as a fictional narrative or fable might begin. For instance, "[f]or a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today" (3). I think that it is important to examine closely Foucault's choice of words. Instead of stating as *history* goes, or as history informs/tells us, he specifically uses the word story, immediately subverting the authority that the word history would evoke. Story is linked to narrative, and ultimately to fiction. As such, this linkage immediately suggests that if we are to liken history to story, then history is a fictional discourse that informs our lives

as opposed to being an authoritative counting and recounting of that which has been. In addition, this understanding of history also suggests that we are informed and shaped largely by discourses that determine our conceptualizations, not by establishments/institutions that shape us. As such, the truth<sup>1</sup> of the matter lies in an analysis of discourse itself, not in the details that the discourse itself advocates.

As such, Foucault critiques Freud's repressive hypothesis. The repressive hypothesis purports that the relationship between power and sex is a matter of repression. Foucault challenges the repressive hypothesis that encircles western notions of sexuality which maintains that western culture has become more and more squeamish about sexuality. Moreover, the repressive hypothesis has a greater emphasis on restraining sex which favours a sanitized, puritanical version of reproductive sexuality as the only exercise of sexuality permissible. In addition, it maintains the idea that the last few centuries banished all sexualities that are non-heterosexual. Sex has become mysterious, taboo, and has ultimately silenced all forms of sexual display and pleasure. As such, the west has become repressed and in its discourse of sex.

Foucault argues that this is not the case suggesting that the repressive hypothesis is a myth. Foucault asserts that sex became monitored but not repressed or silenced in any categorical manner. For instance, by determining which kinds of discourse were acceptable; who could and couldn't be sexual, and how the tone and discourse acceptable shifted over time which usually favoured doctors, educators, judges (etc), not women and children. For example, Doctors placed limits on sexuality and tried to normalize it. They

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, if one attempts to make any claims to/of 'truth,' the only truth that can be deduced is that which concerns discourse itself. As Foucault suggests, there is no truth outside of discourse.

created discourses that tried to repress sexuality, and that were considered acceptable under the auspice that sexuality was not to be encouraged.

Foucault acknowledges sexuality was silenced in particular segments of the social strata. For instance, it being taboo in bourgeois settings; women's sexuality and children's sexuality were not addressed. And, there was an increased sanitation of language. Sexuality was more closely monitored, examined, and classified. Sex was positioned as being sinful, illegal, or both. In such a setting, there was a restriction on the tone of sexuality. However, at the same time, there was an explosion of sexual discourse; mostly because it was being monitored. Sexuality became more talked about as the minute insignificant details of sex became talked about. In turn, there was a strong nexus of discourses of sexuality which gave rise to new forms of sexual expression, new practices, perversions, pleasures. If you place restrictions on sexuality (or anything), it will find other ways of expressing itself. As a result, this repression/restriction causes desire to appear in new places. As such, against to the theory of repression, there has been an intensification and multiplication of sex. According to Foucault,

rather than the uniform concern to hide sex, rather than a general prudishness of language, what distinguishes the last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into discourse. Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with the verbal proprieties imposed by the Age of

Reason, what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse. (34)

Moreover, through its various mediums, sexual discourses become more refined. The “coarse, obscene and indecent” (3) discourse was replaced with a number of complex discourses that employed technical language and expertise that placed a stronger control on their subject matter. As such, as much as sexuality was surfacing in its subtle, overt fashions, it was being monitored constantly with severe and acute scrutiny.

Foucault only fleetingly mentions sexuality outside western discourse in the knowledge of sensual pleasures of *ars erotica* (erotic arts) which maintains that the truth it contains is the truth about pleasure itself: how pleasure can be experienced, intensified or maximized. This brief cameo of a truth behind sex, even if it is manifest/evidenced vis-à-vis pleasure and the body, via “the practice itself” (57) has enough force to debunk the cynicism, even nihilism, that encircles (Foucault’s conceptions of) western sexual discourses; however, the suggestion that there is no truth accessible to us, and that everything is merely a construct of discourse in relation to power itself, undermines the promise of such an assertion. Here, Foucault defaults to the standard eroticization of the other/eastern sex[ual practices], phrasing and positioning them within his rhetoric as exotic, even foreign; ultimately, sex is something that must remain “secret” because “it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged” (57). Interestingly, later on in his argument, Foucault suggests that refusing to confess the details, or more simply, refusing to talk, of one’s sex/”truth” (even though truth is still a problematic term) is a means of evading power (a concept adopted and embraced by Queer Theorists). However, this point is not linked back to the practices of the east. Therefore, Foucault,

being a westerner, takes all the credit for the potential resolution/remedy to the constraints and suffocation of the power structures: refusing to engage with them and keeping one's sex private.

In contrast, Foucault delineates how “our western civilization” practices a *scientia sexualis*, involves “procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret” (58); in other words, confession. Here, Foucault delineates the parallel between religious confession and psychiatric practices. Medical practices become like confession—the cure to pathologies relied on being able to confess the details of sexuality. Through the discourse of confession, people no longer confessed only sexual deeds, but were also expected to confess desires, thoughts, dreams—the slightest inclination toward sex. People were made to be constantly aware of their sexuality and to talk about it in all its aspects. Therefore, there was an effort to transform all sexual desire into discourse. Through this discourse of confessional sex, in the west, it was thought that we could find something about our being, our individuality through the details of our sex life. Therefore, sexual desire was transformed into a discourse as a means to extract knowledge of and around sex, suggesting that sex is the root of our lives and our character. Foucault describes how the

machinery of power that focused on this whole alien strain [those who did not practice reproductive sex] did not aim to suppress it, but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality: it was implanted in bodies, slipped in beneath the modes of conduct, made into a principle of classification and intelligibility, established as a *raison d'être* and a natural order of disorder. (44)

As such, the categorization of certain forms of social and sexual behavior as deviant is a means of controlling and ordering them. Like a priest in religious discourse, the psychoanalyst or psychiatrist who asks his patients to say what he desires is establishing a relationship of power and control. As a result, the tradition of confession was fused with scientific discourse, thus creating our modern concept of sexuality; however, this modern sexuality has more to do with the discourses controlling/monitoring sex than with sex itself.

Sex became something to be studied rationally, to be analyzed and classified and understood as a statistical phenomenon. For example,

the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type, 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. It was everywhere present in him: at the roof of all his actions because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. (43)

In other words, this passage suggests that a person became defined by the shape and substance of his/her sexuality. One's sexuality was seen to be the focal point of their entire being. In other words, sex was treated as the banner under which being was defined or understood.

In the west, according to Foucault, we are obsessed with finding the truth of sex. If we figure out the truth of our sex, we can find out the truth of our being—sex will give us truth. To reiterate, in order to understand ourselves, we need to be subjected to medical

views of sexuality as our 'true' sex is hidden from view and invariably from ourselves at large. In addition to being a means of accessing and attaining truth, in the west, confession is sought-after as a form of liberation from repressive powers. As such, this leads us to the duality inherent in subjectivity itself: the dualism of being subjects of confession and subject to powers which demand confessions from us; in other words, the western "constitution as subjects in both senses of the word" (60). Therefore, this suggestion that sexual confession is therapeutic, and capable of leading to a cure, is highly problematic, what exactly is one being cured of? The ambiguity of sex? What does this 'clarity' achieve? As such, Foucault is suspicious of these practices and is critical of western culture which positions confession as good and necessary. Moreover, he argues that sex has become more and more an object of knowledge as the "the will to knowledge" has "persisted in constituting [...] a science of sexuality" (12-3) spoken through the perspective of a distanced (autonomous) observer<sup>2</sup>.

Enlightenment thinkers like Kant used faith in rational thought and autonomy to reinforce Christian ethical beliefs. Kant believed that practical reason could produce universal and absolute moral laws that were eternally true and so compulsory for everyone. In this vein, reason/rationality, as a means of accessing absolutes/truths, is another vehicle/channel of power itself. In other words, rationality is another means of policing and being subject to external forms of power. Moreover, universal and absolute laws are a product of a rational discourse. To this, Foucault echoes how the west has "annex[ed] sex to a field of rationality" (78) and whoever maintains and advocates this rational discourse, speaks not of eternal truth, but rather of "discursive facts" (78). As

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<sup>2</sup> For example, a psychoanalyst or psychiatrist.



such, for Foucault, power, discourse, and knowledge are linked if not synonymous.

Knowledge is never neutral. There is always a “will to knowledge” (12) suggesting that the more we know about something, the more power we have over it: knowledge is an exercise of power.

Power and knowledge are discursive constructions. As such, one can deduce that the concept of sex itself is a construction as well. How we understand certain concepts has a lot to do with what other concepts we link them to or set them up against, and in this thought construct, sexuality is not only a concept but a means of linking concepts to each other. The increased emphasis on sexuality in our modern society is a product of the fact that more and more concepts are connected and understood vis-à-vis sexuality, a practice which Foucault describes in part four: “The Deployment of Sexuality.” In this section, Foucault delineates how sexuality, though also a concept, is primarily a means of linking concepts. Foucault’s understanding on sexuality is a quasi-existential one: sexuality is a human construct. Sexuality contains no truth of being; it is simply, like everything else, a discourse. As such, there is no such thing as “sexuality”: it is not a concept to be discussed in and of itself. Rather, “sexuality” is a banner under which concepts become relayed and intelligible.

Moreover, Foucault claims that sex itself holds no meaning, rather it serves as a kind of causal principle that enables the deployment of sexuality. In a very basic sense, sex is a word we have developed to help us talk about the various deployments of sexuality. For example, calling something sexy has no meaning outside of sexuality. As such, this suggests that we have come to understand the world around us in terms of sex. This is so because sex has been such a convenient point from which power could be

exercised. Therefore, everything is associative, relative, and in constant dialog, particularly with sex. As such, this suggests that there is nothing fixed or static about knowledge, or even power. There is no *truth*, only discourse, and this discourse is “an immense apparatus for producing truth” (56). Therefore, everything takes on meaning within a discourse, and that meaning is in constant subject to change given the different contexts. As the will-to-knowledge is a manifestation of the will-to-power, this suggests that power itself is fluid and is largely shaped by discourse (I say largely shaped because Foucault is aware that power is not only logocentric. Ie physical violence is a manifestation of power and though it could be understood as a discourse, because it is ultimately an exchange, it is certainly not a logocentric one.).

All discourses are forms of power, and discourse itself is a construction. As such, drawing on Jean Baudrillard’s work, *Simulations*, discourse itself the takes place of the real insofar as we cannot know anything outside of it. The discourse becomes the real itself. It is a genre of simulacra that is transposed/superimposed over what would be the real. This whole question of truth is disbarred insofar as there is no truth outside of discourse. Discourse itself creates truths about people. Nietzschean terms, it is through these discourses that all we create is a “mobile army of metaphors” (878), but nowhere do we create truths. Therefore, the only thing that we access through any discourse, through any relationship, structure, understanding, is another discourse of power. As such, things we take to be natural are always inherently infused with power discourses. Our desire functions cannot be divorced from internalized power structures. When we think we are free and immune to power, we are the most naively caught in its clutches. Returning to

Foucault, there is nothing outside of power, it is omnipresent (I will explain this more clearly later on).

Foucault describes how standard western hegemonic notions of power are understood as something that controls and represses us from above (i.e., legal, state), thus reinforcing how power is everywhere around us and in all our relationships. The problem with what Foucault calls the “juridico-discursive” (82) conception of power is that it has a unilateral view of power: it sees power only as repressive, only as negative, and only as law-enforcing. As such, this conception of power is one that influences us externally.

However, Foucault reconceptualizes power in a different light. He frames power as a positive, productive force rather than something that merely serves to constrain us. It is productive because it causes effects and meanings, and is not merely something that prohibits. As such, it gives rise to new discourses and is capable of creating new meanings as well. It enables us to act in the world. Power is not merely a negative force that places the ‘rule of law’ on us. In addition, it can shape the way we think about things. For instance, dominant culture gives an ideal, and an ideal might give us a way that might work for us.

In addition, Foucault further reconceptualizes power as decentralized, diffuse, and omnipresent; there is no “outside” of power and it is not strictly an external force working against us. Moreover, because we are automatically subject to power, a pessimistic reading would argue that we are buying into a social system that is repressive. However, because we are invariably subject to internalizing power structures that originate outside of ourselves, Foucault urges us to become intelligent members of society in order to see these structures for what they are. Foucault asserts that “never have

there existed more centers of power; circular contacts and linkages; never more sites where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold, only to spread elsewhere” (49). However, if there is no outside of power what can we do? Embrace it and exploit it through participation? It is in this interplay, however, that the dictum knowledge of power can play to our favour. Through such awareness, perhaps we are given tools to fashion the lies we want for ourselves.

Foucault also claims that power always produces its own resistances. He states that “[w]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95). We cannot escape the very parameters power itself cannot escape. As such, we are caught up in the interplay between power and resistance. We are always going to be in the fold of power. It can be argued that Foucault’s view of power can be described as post-modern—it is a dispersed power. It is a unilinear direction of power, rather an unpredictable version of power.

Perhaps the dark side of the sexual revolutions is to blind us to the fact that our supposed emancipation is actually the carefully constructed constraint of a hegemony trying to control us through our sexual discourses.

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