Michel Foucault
*The History of Sexuality Vol. 1*
(1976)

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Foucault and Freud

Michel Foucault, painted portrait, Flickr photo shared by Thierry Ehrmann, licensed CC-BY

Freud ca. 1900, Wikimedia Commons, public domain
A history of sexuality (?)

Man bargaining for sex, 5th c. BCE (Greece), Wikimedia Commons, public domain

How Reymont and Melusina were betrothed / And by the bishop were blessed in their bed on their wedlock, 15th c woodcut, Wikimedia commons, public domain
A history of “sexuality” as a concept

• “Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct . . .” (Foucault 105).

• “Nearly one hundred and fifty years have gone into the making of a complex machinery for producing true discourses on sex . . . . It is this deployment that enables something called ‘sexuality’ to embody the truth of sex and its pleasures” (Foucault 68).
“It is a matter of making things more fragile through this historical analysis … . [to show that] what appears obvious to us is not at all so obvious. … I wanted to reintegrate a lot of obvious facts of our practices in the historicity of some of these practices and thereby rob them of their evidentiary status, in order to give them back the mobility that they had and that they should always have.”

(Foucault, “What our Present Is,” interview from 1983)
Foucault’s political role as an intellectual

• His histories can provoke us to question beliefs & practices that have previously seemed “obvious,” but he doesn’t suggest alternative ways of thinking and acting

• **Why?** See quotes on handout about the political role of intellectuals
Will to knowledge

- The French subtitle of this text: *La Volonté de Savoir*

- We have a will to knowledge about sexuality (67, 69, 79)
What is “sexuality”?

- See Foucault’s examples of sexualities pp. 43, 47
- Seems to refer to aspects of individuals & relationships that include:
  - physiological organs and systems like genitals, hormones, and their functioning
  - desires, feelings, fantasies, pleasures
  - activities one engages in, behaviours towards self and others
- Also often considered an important part of individual identity
Some current names for sexual orientations (a part of “sexuality”)

- Heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality
- Androphilia, gynephilia (or gynecophilia)
- Pansexuality/omnisexuality
- Polyamory
- Asexuality/nonsexuality

Polyamory icon, Wikimedia Commons, public domain
Some sexuality categories today

Paraphilic disorders in DSM V: exhibitionistic, voyeuristic, frotteuristic, sadistic, masochistic, fetishistic, pedophilic, transvestic disorders

To count as having a “disorder”, a person must

“feel personal distress about their interest, not merely distress resulting from society’s disapproval, or have a sexual desire or behavior that involves another person’s psychological distress, injury, or death, or a desire for sexual behaviors involving unwilling persons or persons unable to give legal consent.”

Another sexuality disorder

Female sexual interest/arousal disorder in DSM V:

- lack of or reduced: (the following is a subset)
  - Interest in sexual activities
  - Sexual/erotic thoughts or fantasies
  - Initiation of sexual activities with partner or receptivity to initiation by partner
  - Sexual pleasure in sexual activities

- Lasting 6 months or longer

- Causes significant clinical distress
Sexuality and identity

• “An asexual is someone who does not experience sexual attraction. Unlike celibacy, which people choose, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who we are” (Asexuality Visibility and Education Network website).

• “Sexual orientation and gender identity are important aspects of our overall identity.” (PFLAG Canada website)

• Compare Foucault pp. 69, 78
Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

My photos of my personal copies of these books
1960s & 70s liberation movements

Gay rights demonstration, NYC, 1976. Wikimedia Commons, public domain
The overall argument in the text

- Responding to the "repressive hypothesis" (see handout)
Foucault’s overall response to the repressive hypothesis

• The “repressive hypothesis” is not the whole story of the relationship between power and sex for the last 200-300 years (10-12)

• Trying to “liberate” our true, natural sexual identities from repressive power ignores how those identities themselves are produced by a form of power that he calls “bio-power.”
Response to R.H. 1

Instead of silence, there has been a “discursive explosion” (17), a “steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex” (18; see also 33)

• E.g., concerns about children’s onanism (and that of others), women’s hysteria, the study and classification of “abnormal,” perverse sexualities
Onanism

Anonymous pamphlet, early 18th c., London: ONANIA OR, THE Heinous Sin OF Self-Pollution, AND All its Frightful Consequences, in both SEXES, Considered. WITH Spiritual and Physical Advice to those, who have already injur’d themselves by this Abominable Practice.

http://english.byu.edu/facultysyllabi/KLawrence/ONANIA.pdf

Samuel-Auguste Tissot, L’Onanisme. Dissertation sur les Maladies Produites par la Masturbation (1760)

Sexual perversions

Richard von Krafft- Ebing (German), *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886)

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Response to R.H. 1, cont’d

We have developed a *scientia sexualis*, in part by using “confessional” techniques

- In 16th-17th c. & beyond, Catholic confession starts to focus on sex, and on inner thoughts, desires, fantasies rather than only on activities (19-21)

- Confessional practices spread and become part of the *scientific study of sexuality* (63-67), including in Freudian psychoanalysis (66, & Freud on confession (handout))
Scientia sexualis and ars erotica

“two great procedures for producing the truth of sex” (57)

- *Ars erotica*: the art of erotics—studying sexual pleasure for the sake of intensifying it, multiplying it

- *Scientia sexualis*: seeking the “truth” about sexuality in order to create scientific knowledge, categorize individuals around a “norm”
A new form of power, **bio-power**, works to promote and manage life through regulating and managing sex (rather than prohibiting it)

We often think of power in terms of rules & laws that negate, prohibit actions (83-85)

-- power & sex, on this view: “Where sex & pleasure are concerned, power can ‘do’ nothing but **say no to them**” (83)
Response to R.H. 2

New form of power, bio-power: sex is something to be “managed,” controlled, regulated by medical & social sciences, public health authorities, rather than prohibited (24, 41)

Sovereign power: the right to make die or let live (alternative translation for quote on p. 136)

Bio-power: the power to make live or let die (different way of saying quote on p. 138)
Response to R.H. 2

Examples of bio-power:

-- studying birth and death rates, rates and distribution of diseases, health issues related to living and working conditions

-- determining when & how often women need to have mammograms

-- vaccination programs, vision & hearing screening for children
Response to R.H. 3

Sexuality is a product of bio-power, through scientific discourses on sex (105, 68)

-- that physiology, emotions, desires, pleasures can be linked into “sexuality” is constructed by practices of bio-power

-- sexuality becomes “a principle of classification” of individuals (44)
Calls to “liberate” sexuality from repression support the operations of bio-power – how?

-- encourage us to think we have “natural” sexuality as a “secret” important to divulge

-- this supports confessional practices that allow sexuality to be studied, monitored, managed—we participate in bio-power by providing data for scientific study & management of sexuality
Foucault & Freud, again

**Freud**: We need to divulge the sexual secrets deep inside us that are causing us to be neurotic, in order to be healed.

**Foucault**, last quote on handout: “Sexuality is something that we ourselves create—it is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire.”

(“Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity” (interview from 1982))