Chapter 9

Modern sex

The irony . . . is in having us believe that our 'liberation' is in the balance.

Because he was homosexual, writing a history of modern sexuality must have been a particularly personal enterprise for Foucault. His biographers suggest that as an adolescent he suffered from having sexual interests that French society of the 1940s and 1950s regarded mostly with shame or outrage. Even the generally tolerant milieu of the École normale was not entirely hospitable to homosexuality. Foucault makes it clear that one of his reasons for accepting a job in Sweden was the hope, not entirely fulfilled, of finding a more open sexual climate. Even though the details of Foucault’s sex life remain sketchy – and why shouldn’t they? – there is every reason to think that the experience of gay marginality was an important part of his life. On the other hand, he was as unwilling to accept the identity of ‘homosexual’ as he was any other. He seldom wrote or spoke on record as a ‘gay man’, and, when he did – for example, in a few interviews with gay publications – his attitude toward the activist gay community is more that of a sympathetic observer than a committed participant. He is most attracted by what he sees as recent gay explorations of new forms of human community and identity.

In any case, homosexuality was just one of many topics to be
covered by Foucault’s history of sexuality, which in addition to a volume called ‘Perverts’ would also have volumes on children, women, and married couples. Moreover, his general introduction to the project, the only volume of the series actually published, shows that, as in *Discipline and Punish*, his treatment would expand beyond marginalized groups to everyone in modern society. In fact, it seems clear that, from the beginning, Foucault’s work on sexuality was developing a dimension beyond that of power relations. It was becoming a history of the formation of subjects in not only a political but also a psychological and ethical sense.

The starting-point is, however, still Foucault’s conception of modern power, which is most explicitly set out in volume one of the *History of Sexuality*. As a result, Foucault’s initial treatment of sexuality is a fairly straightforward extension of the genealogical method of *Discipline and Punish*. The method is applied to the various modern bodies of knowledge about sexuality (‘sciences of sexuality’) in order to show their intimate association with the power structures of modern society. The focus of this aspect of Foucault’s discussion is what he calls the ‘repressive hypothesis’. This is the common assumption that the primary attitude of modern society toward sex (beginning in the 18th century, reaching a peak in the Victorian Age, and still exerting strong influence today) was negative; that, except for the closely delimited sphere of monogamous marriage, sexuality was opposed, silenced, and, as far as possible, eliminated.

Foucault does not deny the fact of repression. The Victorian age covered bosoms, censored literature, and waged vigorous campaigns against masturbation. But he denies that modern power is primarily exercised through repression and that opposition to repression is an effective way of resisting modern power. Rather, he thinks that modern power created new forms of sexuality by inventing discourses about it. For example, although same-sex relations have occurred throughout human history,
homosexual as a distinct category, with defining psychological, physiological, and perhaps even genetic characteristics, was created by the power/knowledge system of the modern sciences of sexuality.

According to Foucault, sexual repression is a superficial phenomenon; far more significant is the ‘veritable discursive explosion’ (HS, 17) of talk about sex that began in the 17th century, with the Counter-Reformation’s legislation on the practice of confession. Penitents were required to ‘examine their consciences’ with a thoroughness and nuance previously unheard of. It was not enough to say ‘I slept with a woman other than my wife’; you had to say how many times, just what sorts of acts were involved, whether the woman was herself married. Nor was it enough to report overt actions. Equally important were thoughts and desires, even if not carried out. But even here it was not enough to say, ‘I thought about sleeping with a woman other than my wife’. You also had to determine if you had dwelt on the thought, found enjoyment in it rather than rejecting it immediately; and, if you had entertained it, whether this was done with a certain inadvertence or with ‘full consent of the will’. All these factors were needed for the confessor to determine the degree of guilt (for example, mortal versus venial sin), impose an appropriate penance, and give advice for moral improvement. The result for penitents was an ever deeper and more precise self-knowledge, the outcome of a ‘hermeneutics of the self’ that revealed as fully as possible their inner sexual natures. Foucault’s suggestion, however, is that this nature is not so much discovered as constituted by the required self-examination. What I am sexually depends on the categories I am required to use in making my confession.

A large part of the history of modern sexuality is the secular adaptation and expansion of these religious techniques of self-knowledge. Confession may no longer be made to a priest but it is surely made to one’s doctor, psychiatrist, best friend, or, at least, to oneself. And the categories that define the possibilities of one’s
sexual nature are not self-chosen but accepted on the authority of ‘experts’ in the new modern sciences of sexuality: the Freuds, the Kraft-Ebbings, the Havelock Ellises, the Margaret Meads. Such experts present as discoveries about human nature what are actually just new social norms for behaviour.

Of course, there is a distinction between sexuality as a social construct and sex as a biological reality. Foucault does not deny that there are, for example, undeniable physiological facts about human reproduction. But he maintains that once we move from sheer biology to the inevitably hermeneutic and normative concepts of psychology, anthropology, etc., the distinction breaks down. The Oedipal complex, for example, is tied to assumptions about the meaning and value of the bourgeois family; it is not just another fact, like the physiology of conception. Even what seem to be simple biological facts, for example, the distinction of male and female, can turn out to have normative social significance, as is demonstrated by the case of Herculine Barbin, a 19th-century hermaphrodite, who was raised as a female but, in her twenties, came under the scrutiny of doctors who decided that she was in fact a man and forced her to live as one. Foucault published the poignant memoirs Barbin wrote before committing suicide at the age of thirty.

Given his critique of the repressive hypothesis, Foucault is able to develop a history of sexuality that often parallels his history of the prison. Just as the modern sciences of criminology define categories of social dysfunction (juvenile delinquent, kleptomaniac, drug addict, serial killer, etc.) that are simultaneously sources of knowledge and of control regarding their ‘subjects’, so the modern sciences of sexuality define categories of sexual dysfunction (homosexual, nymphomaniac, fetishist, etc.) that have a parallel role as power/knowledge. Foucault cites the case of Jouy, a slightly retarded 19th-century French peasant, who would occasionally entice young girls of his village into what Foucault describes as ‘harmless embraces’. No doubt such things had gone on in French villages for centuries, but someone reported Jouy to the authorities.
who brought down upon him the full brunt of the new science of sexuality. After detailed legal and medical examinations, he was found guilty of no crimes but was nonetheless confined to a hospital for the rest of his life as a ‘pure object of medicine and knowledge’ (HS, 32). Many of us today will be shocked at Foucault’s insouciance over what we might well judge sexual molestation, but Foucault would no doubt see our reaction as itself a sign of the effects of the modern power/knowledge system.

Three of Foucault’s six planned volumes were to treat specific marginalized groups: children, as the object of the campaign to suppress masturbation (The Children’s Crusade); women as subjects of the sexually based disorder of hysteria (The Hysterical Woman); and homosexuals and other groups judged sexually ‘abnormal’ (Perverts). All of these, like the criminals of Discipline and Punish, were constituted and controlled by hierarchical observation and normalizing judgements. Further, as in the case of criminality, there was no real possibility of eliminating or even substantially reducing the targeted behaviours, so the de facto function of the power apparatus was simply to control segments of the population. A fourth projected volume was The Malthusian Couple, where Foucault’s topic would have been various power structures designed to limit the population and improve its quality. This, again as in Discipline and Punish, is readily seen as an extension of disciplinary power to non-marginal groups.

In the concluding chapter of the introduction to The History of Sexuality, Foucault seems to be moving beyond sexuality as such and develops a notion of biopower, which embraces all the forms of modern power directed toward us as living beings, that is, as subject to standards of not just sexual but biological normality. Biopower is concerned with the ‘task of administering life’, a process that operates on two levels. On the level of individuals, there is an ‘anatomo-politics of the human body’; on the level of social groups, there is a ‘bio-politics of populations’ (HS, 139. The first level implicitly complements the primarily epistemological
treatment of medicine in *The Birth of the Clinic*, making explicit the political significance (in a broad sense that includes the social and the economic) of the medical norms defining a healthy individual. So, for example, the modern medical notion of obesity corresponds to the marginalized social class of ‘fat people’, and modern techniques of drug treatments of illness are inextricably tied to the economics of the pharmaceutical industry. The second level concerns the modern focus on a nation’s entire population as a resource that must be protected, supervised, and improved. Thus, capitalism requires universal medical care and education to ensure an adequate workforce; racist ideologies call for eugenic measures to protect the purity of the population ‘stock’; and military planners develop the concept of ‘total war’, as a battle between not just armies but entire populations.

We see, then, that Foucault’s project of a history of modern sexuality was, even as he began it, expanding to a history of modern biopower. And from the late 1970s on, he took up the themes of such a history. So, for example, he returned to issues in the history of medicine and psychiatry, now from the broader perspective of his new view of power. Also, he began studying what he called ‘governmentality’: the art, developed from medieval pastoral models, of rulers’ care for the populations under their control.

But even more significant was another direction of expansion, toward what Foucault came to call a ‘history of the subject’. This had already begun to emerge in *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault occasionally noted how the objects of disciplinary control could themselves internalize the norms whereby they were controlled and so become monitors of their own behaviour. In the context of sexuality, this phenomenon becomes central, since individuals are supposed to discern their own fundamental nature as sexual beings and, on the basis of this self-knowledge, transform their lives. As a result, we are controlled not only as *objects* of disciplines that have expert knowledge of us; we are also controlled as self-scrutinizing and self-forming *subjects* of our own knowledge.
This new perspective leads Foucault to question the modern ideal of sexual liberation. I discover my deep sexual nature through self-scrutiny and come to express this nature by overcoming various hang-ups and neuroses. But am I really freeing myself, or am I just reshaping my life in accord with a new set of norms? Isn’t promiscuity as demanding an ideal as monogamy, the imperative to be sexually adventurous as burdensome as a prudish limitation to the missionary position? The magazines, self-help books, and sex manuals that guide us to a life of liberated sexuality seem to induce in us as much insecurity and fear about our sexual attractiveness and ability to perform as sermons and tracts did in our grandparents about the dangers of sexual indulgence. More importantly, is my acceptance of the demands of liberation any more an expression of my ‘true nature’ than were our grandparents’ acceptance of the demands of traditional morality? Foucault suggests that, in both cases, the acceptance may merely be an internalization of external norms. The irony of our endless preoccupation with our sexuality, Foucault says, is that we think that it has something to do with liberation (HS, 159).

Even more importantly, Foucault’s new perspective led him to the view that his study of sexuality was really part of an effort to understand the process whereby individuals become subjects. He was, he concluded, writing not so much a history of sexuality as a history of the subject. This transition arose from the fact that he had found sexuality to be an integral part of our identity as selves or subjects. To say that I am homosexual or that I am obsessed with Albertine is to say something central about what I am in the concreteness of my subjectivity. Here Foucault seems to return to the standpoint of individual consciousness, which he earlier rejected in his choice of the philosophy of the concept over the philosophy of experience. I, however, would suggest that he never really left this standpoint, but instead rejected transcendental readings of subjectivity that ignored its fundamentally historical nature. In any case, he now felt the ability and the need to give an account of the historical process whereby we become subjects.
question is not how consciousness emerges from unconscious matter but how a conscious being assumes a particular identity, that is, comes to think of itself as directed by a given set of ethical norms, which give its existence a specific meaning and purpose.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault began looking at the way the modern consciousness of an ethical self emerged through the secularization of Christianity’s hermeneutics of the self (as in the confessional practices we discussed above). His original plan was to develop this theme at length in a separate volume on medieval Christian views of sexuality, which he called *Les Avoux de la chair*. (This was to be the second volume of the history of sexuality, followed by the four volumes, on children, women, perverts, and couples.) Foucault says he finished a draft of this volume but was not satisfied with what he had written and set it aside. Although the draft apparently does still exist, it has never been published (Foucault’s family have insisted on following his terse injunction: ‘No posthumous publications.’). Nor is the draft available in the Foucault Archives in Paris; very few people have even seen it and there are no detailed accounts of its content. (Some who have seen it say it isn’t really a complete draft, as Foucault suggested.)

In any case, as Foucault reflected further on his project, he decided that he needed to begin not with the Middle Ages but with ancient Greek and Roman views on sexuality and the self. He had concluded that to properly understand the Christian hermeneutic view of the self, he had to trace its origins and differences from ancient ideas. He began brushing up his school-boy Greek and Latin and had many discussions with two of his friends and colleagues in the Collège de France: Paul Veyne, a Roman historian, and Pierre Hadot, an historian of ancient philosophy. This major redirection, combined with ill health (which turned out to be the AIDS from which Foucault eventually died) seriously delayed the project. It was only in 1984, just before his death, that Foucault was able to publish two volumes on the ancient world: *The Use of Pleasure*, which discussed Greek texts of the 4th century BC, and
Although these books were titled Volume II and Volume III of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, there is no sense in which Volume I, which we have been discussing here, can be regarded as an introduction to them. Put roughly, the project Volume I is introducing is one in which modern sexuality would be studied as an example of bio-power: biological (in a broad sense) knowledge as a basis for socio-political control of individuals and groups. This is a project Foucault never carried out, although there are some elements of it dispersed in his writings before and after Volume I. Volumes II and III are part of a study of ancient sexuality as an example of the ethical formation of the self. It has no overlap with the earlier interest in bio-power, although there is a connection through the shared topic of the Christian hermeneutics of the self. It would have been less misleading if Foucault had not presented these two books as continuations of his original history of sexuality. He may have envisaged some broader project that would have approached sexuality through both bio-power and the formation of the self. But at the end of his life he seems to have rather been moving away from the history of sexuality. His new direction, as we shall see, connects the formation of the subject not to sexuality but to what he came to call ‘games of truth’.