

# *Between Marx and Nietzsche: The Limits of (Sexual) Liberation in Foucault's History of Sexuality, Volume 1*

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## ABSTRACT

As Charles Taylor has aptly noted: Michel Foucault “disconcerts.” Foucault’s writings as a whole invite response and critique, and yet he refused to engage in the typical polemics of academia, much to the frustration of his peers. While his works were (and remain) radical, he disdained “revolution” and politics more generally. A full two decades after his untimely death, the questions remain: how should we approach the work of this philosophical *maudit*—how do we use his books? In this paper I delimit one aspect of Foucault’s project, one that arises periodically throughout his *oeuvre* but comes to a head in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. This is the problem of “liberation”—particularly, in this case, with regard to sexuality and the possibilities of undermining the so-called *scientia sexualis* that according to Foucault controls both our “sex” and our “selves.” At stake here is the entire Foucaultian notion of power, which reaches its most terrifying and omnipotent apex in Foucault’s rejection of the “repressive hypothesis” and the ostensible alternative found in the “great sexual sermon.”

*I would like my books to be... Molotov cocktails, or minefields; I would like them to self-destruct after use, like fireworks.*

— Michel Foucault, in an Interview with J.-L. Ézine

As Charles Taylor has aptly noted: Michel Foucault “disconcerts” (Taylor 69). Yet Foucault also declaims, making his work intensely seductive, whether he is speaking of madness, criminality, or sexuality. Though frequently categorized with Jacques Derrida as a “post-structuralist” thinker, Foucault was quick to deny this label (and all others), rejecting what he saw as the navel-gazing of Derridean deconstruction for the critical strategies of “archaeology” and “genealogy.” Foucault’s writings as a whole invite response and critique, and yet he refused to engage in the typical polemics of academia, much to the frustration of his peers. While his works were (and remain) radical, he disdained “revolution” and politics more generally. A full two decades after his untimely death, the questions remain: how should we approach the work of this philosophical *maudit*—how do we use his books? In this paper I delimit one aspect of Foucault’s project, one that arises periodically throughout his *oeuvre* but comes to a head in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. This is the problem of “liberation”—particularly, in this case, with regard to sexuality and the possibilities of undermining the so-called *scientia sexualis* that according to Foucault controls both our “sex” and our “selves.” At stake here is the entire Foucaultian notion of power, which reaches its most terrifying and omnipotent apex in Foucault’s rejection of the “repressive hypothesis” and the ostensible alternative found in the “great sexual sermon.”

*Pace* the claims of Thomas Flynn, Foucault is no “parrhesiast”; i.e., he makes no claims to knowing or speaking the “truth”. Indeed, he follows quite faithfully the Nietzschean “perspectivist” approach to truth as being largely if not wholly interpretation (“a mobile army of metaphors”). Yet his frequent declamatory tone and standard pose as a revealer of misread historical facts may easily dupe the reader into hearing Foucault as a prophet of the very notion he tries to subvert—the Will to Truth. Even an “archaeologist” or “genealogist” must have a project, and Foucault is not doing disinterested history, history without intent. Thus the problem: How can a writer assert a relativistic stance without denying the “truth value” of such a claim? The relativist ultimately becomes mired in that grand (epistemo-)logical quandary

known as the Liar’s Paradox. More specifically: if Foucault’s presupposition with respect to truth “tells the truth,” if it is to retain any semblance of “validity” or even persuasive force, then all knowledge is suspect in its pretense of objectivity, undermining the presupposition itself. From this problem arise others, particularly with respect to the Foucaultian thesis on power, which, in its omnipresence and elusiveness, undercuts the very possibility of subjective assertion—of “freedom” in any meaningful sense of the term. If this is the case, where is Foucault standing so that he is out of its reach?

Thus there are two related questions which arise upon an examination of Foucault’s work up to and including the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*: 1) How does Foucault avoid sliding down what Cornel West has called “the slippery Nietzschean slope of wholesale metaphorical constructions of ‘reality’”? How does he evade both doing history in its conventional objective form, and (“merely”) telling stories? In short, Nietzsche the perspectivist pulls the carpet from under the historian’s feet by destroying the rationale of his job, i.e., getting a reliable grasp on the past. Can one adopt Nietzschean “truth” without accepting other Nietzschean tropes about power and politics? Foucault’s answer was yes. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” he pours Nietzschean contempt on “the history of the historians,” which, striving for neutrality, conjures up an implausible “point of support outside of time.” Yet is his “genealogy” any less likely to claim the firmness of its ground? Irony catches up even to the ironist. Second, it can be asked how Foucault reconciles his consistent (and most un-Nietzschean) sympathy for the weak, the victims, the marginalized, with his seeming rejection of alternatives to the power of the *scientia sexualis* and general political indifference.

The central thesis of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* is outlined in its brief but brilliant first chapter, “We ‘Other Victorians.’” As a culture we are mistaken, says Foucault, in asserting that sex (and thus, in our understanding, sexuality) in the modern West has been, since Victorian times, chained and silenced—“repressed” to employ the familiar Freudian argot. Such is not the case, or at least the story of large-scale sexual repression is not nearly so simple as many seem to believe. As if it were not enough to shatter our myth of societal sexual repression, Foucault loses no time in questioning the reaction to the “repressive hypothesis”, i.e., the discourse of sexual freedom centered in the belief that the freeing of sex, the freeing of *eros* in Marcuse’s (or Mary

Daly's) terms from its social bonds will set us free both as individuals and as a society, to live blissfully in a utopian community where Truth, Love, Pleasure and Justice reign in harmony and majesty. This, says Foucault, belies a flawed conception of freedom, truth, and subjectivity. Why? The repressive hypothesis a) underestimates the cunning and range of power structures, limiting such to negativity and prohibition; b) makes the errant conflation of power with subjectivity and agency (Foucault is still too much of a 'structuralist' to let this pass); and c) misconceives sex as an "actuality" at the root of what is in fact a socially constructed discourse of sexuality.

First and most generally, power is not simply "punitive"—it does not just deny, silence, restrain. Power can also be, in fact *need* also be productive; a purely "cynical" form of power, says Foucault, would never last. Although we have come to accept confession as a liberating revolt against the silence of the Great Repression, confession is itself a form of the subtle workings of power, one that in fact promotes discussion and analysis of sexuality. This is not a new theme for Foucault, as his concern with the discourse of power dates back to the late 1960s, and can be seen to run through all his works in various degrees. In volume one of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault reiterates the trope of what he calls the "microphysics of power"—i.e., the diffused and disembodied (subjectless) aspect of such, which floats anonymously but ruthlessly pervades our world. In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault limns the power of Kafka rather than the more Orwellian sort that he dealt with in *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*. What is required is not a "theory" but rather an "analytics" of power, which must free itself from the "juridico-discursive" representation of power that "governs both the thematics of repression and the theory of the law as constitutive of desire" (*HOS I* 82). Foucault's explanation for the popularity of the juridical notion of power (which neglects "everything that makes for its productive effectiveness, its strategic resourcefulness, [and] its positivity") is that, "power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself." Thus, secrecy in power is neither an abuse of such nor its negative, but is rather "indispensable to its operation" (86). Power is only accepted as a "pure limit set on freedom," a capping of freedom, its fulfillment rather than its abuse. But who, exactly, is accepting this power, why must it mask itself, and do these in some ways imply at least a modicum of agency if not subjectivity?

In exploring these questions it will be useful to refer to the historico-political question raised by Foucault as a "second doubt" about the repressive hypothesis: "Did the critical discourse that addresses itself to repression come to act as a roadblock to a power mechanism that had operated unchallenged up to that point, or is it not in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it 'repression'?" (*HOS I* 10). In other words, is the contemporary age's concern with repression a genuine revolt against repression (or, more correctly, against the reality of repression, which is the *scientia sexualis*) or is it actually a continuation (by other, more subtle means) and necessary complement to the repressive age and its machinations?

Foucault contrasts two prominent "procedures" of sexuality: *ars erotica*, associated with the Eastern world (and Rome), and *scientia sexualis*, a distinctively Western phenomenon with roots in Christian confession. In the former, truth is "drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience" (*HOS I* 57). Importantly,

"pleasure is not considered in a relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but is first and foremost in relation to itself." Mastery of the *ars erotica* translates into mastery of body and soul—"a singular bliss." In contrast, the West has its science of sexuality, in which "procedures for telling the truth of sex... are geared to the art of initiation and the masterful secret:... the confession" (58). *Homo docilis* reappears as the sexual subject. Moreover, the science of sex is characterized by an "exhaustive articulation of desires," which produces knowledge that claims to hold the key to mental and physical health as well as to social well being. Indeed, as Foucault puts it in an essay entitled "The Subject and Power," the "conviction that the truth can be discovered through the self-examination of consciousness and the confession of one's thoughts and acts now appears so natural, so compelling, indeed so self-evident, that it seems unreasonable to posit that such self-examination is a central component in a strategy of power." This "unseemliness" rests in our attachment to the repressive hypothesis; "if the truth is inherently opposed to power, then its uncovering would surely lead us on the path to liberation."

Such, indeed, would it seem. But with truth a chimera, subjectivity imposed, and power creating both sex and sexuality, what is left for us to do? Confession, the self-examination/revelation of one's self (one's "truth") is not opposed to, but rather supports the *scientia sexualis*. What then, of the *ars erotica*? "*Scientia sexualis* versus *ars erotica*, no doubt," says the author, relishing, it would seem, the chance to burst yet another bubble of hope. For there is doubt, and Foucault, unwilling as he is in this *History of Sexuality* to allow for the sort of Manichaean dualisms that characterize earlier works like *Madness and Civilization*, raises the problem of turning to the erotic arts as an alternative: since the last century, the science of sex has functioned to a certain extent as an *ars erotica*. "Perhaps," says Foucault, "we have at least invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it... of luring it out in the open" (*HOS I*, 71). In this sense, what Foucault later came to call (with evident derision) the "Californian cult of the Self" (a salvo seemingly directed at Marcuse, a Frankfurt School neo-Marxist who by the 1960s had morphed into a guru of West Coast hippie counterculture) can be seen as the pinnacle of *scientia sexualis* performing as *ars erotica*. In particular, this link can be made in light of what Foucault sees as the modern "multiplication and intensification of pleasures connected to the production of truth about sex...—the formidable pleasure of analysis" that the West has been cultivating for several centuries. All this constitutes a vision of an erotic art that is "secretly transmitted by confession and the science of sex." Foucault denies the ostensible novelty of this modern alternative to Christian self-constitution-through-abnegation and the coldness of scientific rationality, as it is in fact merely a continuation of these practices under the auspices of an "art" of sex and the self. Like the *scientia sexualis* that emerged in the 19th century, the Californian cult demands that "sex (always) speak the truth... and... that it tell us our truth... the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness" (69). Through techniques of analysis and therapy, the "escaped" truth of the subject reappears (70). Thus, the feigned art of the Californian cult is merely another form of science, taking on an aspect of "freedom from" and creativity, while retaining more sinister implications of both determinism and the ostensible exposition

of Reality—all attuned to the creation of subjectivity, in both senses of the term.

Again, these conclusions points raise a number of important questions with respect to liberation and sexuality. Foucault is certainly no “praxis” philosopher of the Gramscian or Lukácsian sort, nor does he accept the engaged critical theory of Jürgen Habermas. *Theoria* can destroy on its own, as a gun, bomb, mine, or to borrow once again from Nietzsche, a hammer. The very notions of politics and revolutions are outdated, according to Foucault. Yet the “disciplining” of sexuality is quite different from that of criminality or insanity, in that the locus of control is the subject and the subject alone—that is where power asserts itself, without the need for a Panopticon, hospitals, or the asylums of the Great Confinement. What these forms of disciplinary power share, however, is that, just as prisons are less intended to eliminate offenses than “to distinguish them, distribute them, use them,” and in so doing “tend to assimilate the transgression of the laws in a general tactics of subjection,” so too the power that controls sexuality is omnivorous—assimilating, feeding off the transgression of its own codes. But does such a representation of power have validity? If power is ultimately everything, is power not then nothing? Is it worthwhile to speak of power at all?

If Foucault were truthful about the implications of his work, he would have to say no. And that would be it. But the ghost of the Frankfurts does not die so easily, nor does Foucault’s sympathy for the poetics (if not the politics) of transgression. Truth in its essentialized meaning may not be opposed to power, but Foucault’s personal truth is certainly one that refuses the kinds of subjectivity that are imposed upon us through discourses of power such as the *scientia sexualis*. Foucault wrote, it has been said, the “history of the present”—attempting to “find the conceptual underpinnings of some key practices in modern culture, placing them in historical perspective,” in order to promote reflection upon our own status and situation in a world that impinges upon us so deeply and thoroughly. Foucault may out-Nietzsche Nietzsche by rejecting the Enlightenment project *in toto*, yet for all his *gauchiste* bourgeois-bashing and purported anti-humanism he shows profound sympathy for the marginalized, i.e., those objects of subjectivity who are dispossessed of their humanity (though not their selfhood or identity, which are in fact imposed upon them) by the excrescences of disciplinary society in its myriad forms of power. The attractiveness of Foucault—as a thinker with obvious leftist sympathies, yet one who disdains the polemics and tired pieties of most leftist writing—is also the most disconcerting and difficult characteristic of his work. If power, in this case power over sexuality via the *scientia sexualis*, commodifies its own taboos and eats its own boundaries, then where does that leave liberation or freedom *vis-à-vis* sexuality, and subjectivity more generally? Transgressive sexuality, even in its virulent sado-masochistic form, may work in literature, but what of the “real” world where the science of sex holds us in an iron grasp?

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault’s Manichaeic and most Marcusean diatribe against the rational confinement of the insane, the archaeologist romanticizes the pre-Classical Age when madness had its own share in truth, and was allowed some freedom because of such. In the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, however, to share in the truth of the *scientia sexualis* is to be its dupe. Ironically, the repressive hypothesis and subsequent Great Sexual Sermon are, in some sense, a representation of sexual liberation according to a

possible reading of *Madness and Civilization*—i.e., a search for a new, pure erotics of past days, which in its transgressive capacity will set us free. But whereas madness loses its dignity and its power by becoming a disease, sexuality was “born,” was “created” by the conflation of Christian techniques of confession and scientific analysis. Sexuality seems to be little more than a tool for creating subjects. In short, the random bombing of Foucault does not necessarily open new paths, it may close certain ways of speaking about freedom and liberation, concepts not entirely antithetical, it would seem, to his own project.

It is by now a commonplace to assert that Foucault experienced a crisis of sorts between the publication of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* in 1976 and the second and third volumes (*The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*) some eight years later. Without going into an analysis of possible reasons for the *Kehre* in his later work, it is clear that by the late 1970s Foucault found himself up against a wall created by his own arguments, and was forced to concede a definite program in favor of what he called “a promising line of approach.” Various critiques from his peers, such as Habermas, Taylor, and Lois McNay, focus on the problems raised in this paper, with regard to the limits of Foucault’s neo-Nietzscheanism, where power without a subject coupled with an approach of monolithic relativism reduces the arguments of the author to, at best, incoherence, at worst, absurdity. One can easily extend this critique, focusing more specifically on the thesis of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, and the irresolvable conflict between Frankfurt School Marxist humanism—which, through the bombs of transgressive theory, confronts the powers that be and lauds selective and specific attempts at revolt—and the virulent, Molotov-cocktail-wielding nihilism that denies not only the possibility of revolution (and politics), but of any real subjectivity and freedom.

If, in *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault was too harsh on the Enlightenment (as Klaus Dörner has argued, by giving a one-sided account in which the dialectics of the Enlightenment is “universally resolved in terms of its destructive aspect”), perhaps in the *History of Sexuality, Volume I* he is too soft on the *scientia sexualis*, by allowing it complete and seemingly absolute control. In *Madness and Civilization*, for all its dualism, it was at least clear where the Molotov cocktails were aimed, in the *History of Sexuality* there can be no such surety. Is there anything left in the *ars erotica*, or has the commodification of such (“Undress, make love... but be slim and tanned!”) rendered this path obsolete. Perhaps this problem can be framed in terms of an impossible attempt to conflate Marx and Nietzsche, or as the inevitable residue of Foucault’s earlier proclamations of the “death of man” and of eschatology as anachronistic elements of “pre-critical naïveté.” Whatever the case, the *scientia sexualis* is the Kafkaesque castle in which we dwell seemingly without recourse of escape, even with the random bombing of theorists like Foucault.

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