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***The History of Sexuality—
Volume I: An Introduction***
Summary and Contemplation

Kathryn Wehr

Sex. A three-letter word that grabs your attention and elicits a variety of reactions. Perhaps you'll continue reading this paper, chuckling out loud about the topic or intrigued because the topic is naughty. Maybe you'll push it aside, blushing or irritated. Foucault explores why there are these assorted responses and takes a historical and ontological dig on sexuality in his book, *The History of Sexuality—Volume I: An Introduction*. Reflecting on history from the nineteenth century until the present, Foucault explores the apparent dichotomies of Victorian silence and modern cacophony on sex, its rejection and endorsement. He is not concerned with whether or not sex is deemed as important/unimportant, repressed/liberated or immoral/moral, nor is he proving which attitude is more correct. His objective is to "define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure" that sustains the discourses on human sexuality in the Western world (11). The history of sexuality is the history of discourses—the occurrences and transformations of sex put into discourses and the resulting production of power and propagation of knowledge. In understanding his project in *The History of Sexuality—Volume I: An Introduction*, the links of his power-knowledge duo to his other works and the implications of his analysis become evident.

For Foucault, discourses—the conversations and dissertations on a particular subject—are always present, albeit in multiple forms and on varied topics, in society. Discourses create a rigid

knowledge of the subject in categorizing and defining the topic of discussion. In the process of codifying and normifying, they produce power. Power is the attribute of a “complex, strategical situation” in society, a relation between people based on discursive definitions (93). Power is not an institutional structure or personal strength, nor can it be acquired or seized. Through self-examination and normalization rather than punishment and law, this mode of power gains its authority. With the increase of discursive know-how, concepts of a topic become rigidified, stuck to a particular time, age, ethnicity, gender, class, etc. Hence, a codified Truth about the subject develops. Individuals have a standard to measure themselves against. In internalizing this norm, they subject their behavior—thought and action—to it and give power to this knowledge, forming a power-knowledge.

Sexuality—the discourses on the body and their intrinsic power-knowledge connection—gave rise to the idea of sex. As Foucault asserts, “[T]he deployment of sexuality, with its different strategies, was what established this notion of ‘sex’” (154) in which sex could function as a universal signifier for anatomy, gender, biological functions, pleasure, sensations, and behavior. The conception of sex takes form in the strategies of power, not separate from it.

Within the construct of sex, philosophies and disciplines about the body optimize and multiply life in order to protect the existence of everyone. Discursive practices enhance the body’s capabilities in order for it to become more efficient in life and social institutions— an *anatomo-politics* of the human body (139). These methods also imbue the body with the mechanics of birth, mortality, health and life span – a

biopolitics of the population (139). Together, these two poles— at once anatomic and biological, individual and specific—invest and uphold life. In the process, they develop knowledge of what sustains and improves life. They then invert this know-how to reinforce its purpose and regulations that affirm life via developing a normative vision of what adds to and what detracts from life. Sex is “a means of access to both the life of the body and the life of the species” (146). As this two-fold standard, sex becomes part of the campaign for raising standards of morality, living conditions, and political policies—a way for the body and the population to be regulated. Thus, we are “a society of sexuality” (147). Sexuality is the “object and target” in which the mechanisms that address life also address the individual body and how its proliferation and health is linked to the vitality of the social body (147).

There is not one single or uniform strategy that discourses on sex—sexuality—use. As Foucault states, “Relations of power-knowledge are not static forms of distribution” (99). There is more than one objective in each strategy as well as more than one strategy in each objective. Regardless of technique or its dispersion, the strategy is not homogeneous on all social levels. For example, the discourse that proclaims sex as reproductive has different imperatives for race, class, gender, sexual orientation and age. In each social category, “sex became something to say, and to say exhaustively in accordance with deployments that were varied but all, in their own way, compelling. Whether in the form of a subtle confession in confidence or an authoritarian interrogation, sex... had to be put into words,” articulated, defined, and discussed (32).

Confession is one way in which sex was put into discourse “in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement” (61). This tell-all is part of not only the Church, but also jurisprudence, medicine, education, and family relationships. As Foucault states, “[O]ne confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illness and troubles...” with the greatest precision, in public and in private, to the self and to others, under force or spontaneity (59). Through confession, these institutions learn about the individual’s pleasures, break down discretion and forgetfulness, and reinforce the institution’s boundaries in which the individual—in thought and action—must remain. An individual is authenticated and approved based on how close s/he fits the discursive truth; that is, how much s/he aligns his/herself with the doctrine of sex a particular institution (e.g. politics, economics, religion, or family) proclaims. S/he is judged and punished for deviating from this standard. As an individual internalizes the discursive norms and seeks his/her relation to this “truth,” the obligation to confess becomes ingrained. S/he can no longer perceive this duty as the effect of power, but “natural” and “fundamental” to living (60). Confession is thus an example of how the production and delineations of truth are linked to discursive power.

A lack of acknowledgement is also linked to truth production. According to Foucault, “Choosing not to recognize was another vagary of the will to truth” (55). Silence is an integral part of discourse and its strategies of power. It functions along side what is said. It is necessary in illustrating which discourse is authorized, why it is sanctioned, who has the ability to speak or not speak about sex, and how this power is

distributed (27). In not allowing other explanations of sex into its discourse, it effectively delineated and nailed down what was and was not true about sex. These truths in turn became what sexual acts, desires, and attitudes were permissible and not permissible. Regardless of manifestation or method—said or unsaid—a multiplicity and diversity of intertwining discourses on sex resulted from these varying mechanisms that demand speech. These interrelated, overlapping discourses form a web of power relations, dictums of behaving, thinking, and feeling; this process orders life.

Foucault asserts that in the age of the bourgeois, Victorian silence on sex was coupled with a simultaneous discourse that promised to reveal the truth about sex. Although rules of propriety censored sex on when, where, how much, and to whom to speak about sex, there was also a multiplication of discourses about sex in which the institutions—agencies of power, especially the Church—provoked people to explicitly articulate the sexual act. This proliferation and production of truth was in the form of confession. Every detail and nuance of not only the act itself, but also dreams, thoughts, looks, remarks, pleasure, and desire had to be told. Sex was not, could not, be hidden. It became imperative and an obligation of every “good” Christian to not only “confess to acts contravening the law,” but also to every desire into discourse (21). As a result of this tell-all, individuals were given prescriptions and “guidance” about what was appropriate and inappropriate action *and* thought regarding sex.

Techniques evolved from Catholic and Protestant concerns of the flesh and sin, practice of confession, and procedures of pastoral

guidance to the secular concerns of the economy (e.g. regulation of birth to stabilize the labor force), pedagogy (e.g. controlling the precociousness of youth), and medicine (e.g. deciding women's sexual capacity). These secular interests were an extension of the controls and methods the Church used. Rather than a concentration of everlasting punishment, there was a concern of life. That is, instead of focusing on the sinfulness of an individual's sex life, there was also a concentration on sexual normality and the "perversions" in deviating from this norm. It decided sex's "natural" form and the "normal" amount and role of sex in an individual's life. Within these rigid definitions, science and its adherents considered any aspect of sex outside of its absolute standard as "deviant," "inefficient," or "perverse." In creating a behavioral norm, science created an incentive to talk about sex. There was a standard for an individual to measure his/herself against and to make sure that s/he was neither excessive nor deficient. Thus, a whole pedagogy on signals of sexual perversion in men and especially in women and children developed from this criterion of normalcy. It failed to recognize forms or ends outside of its denotations of normalcy. Additionally, there was an emphasis on sex's role in heredity and an individual's resulting "biological responsibility" to uphold a pure—a moral disease- and pervert-free—society. Thus, a perversion-heredity-degenerate series acted as a deep and widespread technology of sex in which both the sacred and the secular institutions of society were concerned. As Foucault writes, "[S]ex became a matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under surveillance" (116). No discourse was free of an interest in sex, its role and

potential.

Thus, this “interplay of truth and sex,” in its many forms given to us by our predecessors, is part of modern day discourse (57). Rebuffing the contemporary critics who claim that Victorian prudeness lingers in modern society, Foucault shows that sex is not repressed. Rather, there is a technology that elicits and enforces the production of discursive knowledge on sex, a process that results in issues of power and truth. The stimulus to end the sexual repression is a part of the deployment of sexuality, of knowing what sex is, its role, function, and characteristics. The revolution to rid society of sexual silence was merely a tactical shift in the classification of sexuality. Victorian muteness of the nineteenth century is merely traded for modern candidness. One discourse is substituted for another discourse. Hence, sex is rooted firmly in the deployment of sexuality, the discourses on sex.

In understanding the notion of sex, an individual can see how s/he is caught in the deployment of sexuality—the power-knowledge-power cycle. This realization is more important than the act of sex itself. This awareness enables an individual to counter the discursive authority that claims rigid, “supposed to be” knowledge of bodies and pleasure. S/he can decide for his/herself what the truth about his/her sexuality is rather than succumbing to prescriptions of action (e.g. procreate, marriage-only), dualistic thinking (e.g. male/female, moral/immoral), categorical constructs (e.g. pervert, hysteric, tease), and norms of pleasure (e.g. orgasm). This new discourse, however, does not become the ultimate discourse, the complete truth about sex. Every discourse on sex must be questioned for its “tactical productivity” (the

effects of power and knowledge they secure) and “strategical integration” (what relation warrants its use), regardless of whether it is the dominant or subversive, old or new discourse.

The History of Sexuality—Volume I: An Introduction is a continuation of Foucault’s argument on the knowledge-power-truth connection in such works as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* and *The Politics of Truth*. Like *History of Sexuality*, *Discipline and Punish* and *The Politics of Truth* illustrates how discourses posit themselves as the cure-all that “knows” what is “best” for an individual, society, and the future. Foucault challenges the discourse mentality of discovering a transcendental Truth, asserting that discourses are the foundation of society, and the idea of an individual is a subjected product of these discourses. In noting the underside of discourses, Foucault claims that individuals in a liberal society are enveloped in a permanent, invisible, invading panopticism that must be challenged.

The Panopticon is a prison structure with many tiered, singular cells surrounding a central guard tower. The guard can see into the cells, but the prisoner cannot see into the tower. In this method, the crowd of inmates is easily numbered and categorized. “Invisibility is a guarantee of order” (DP 200): the permanent *possibility* of being watched, of being seen doing something s/he is not supposed to, keeps the prisoner’s behavior in line. S/he subjects his/herself to this unverifiable control without direct force. Privileges are given for “good” behavior, a controlled conduct that conforms to the ideals of what a prisoner should be in his/her process of reform to become a “functional” citizen. By internalizing what a “proper” citizen is, s/he disciplines his/herself

to a mode of behavior. No longer is the authority a single executioner on a public scaffold who inflicts bodily pain, but an authority with automated mechanisms, including the individual, who restrict body movement while also prescribing a regimen for the non-corporal “truths”—drives, aptitudes, potentialities—of the person.

The methods of the Panopticon filter into the modes of society and its lateral controls because of the inescapable, all-encompassing discourses— a variety of disciplines, each with a unique know-how about the behavior and capacity that it assigns to an individual. Within the discourses, “the formation of knowledge and the increase of power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process” (DP 224). Disciplines separate out the multiplicity, characterizing and classifying individuals around a discourse-defined truth, qualifying and ranking individuals on how close they fit the presupposed norm. The more an individual conforms, the more s/he aligns with “his [or her] ‘true’ name, ‘true’ place” (DP 198). This sorting is permanent in that it is always present, but malleable in that its form changes from institution to institution and discourse to discourse. The institutions’ central hub of ideals—its guard tower— is open to conforming individuals to inspect and to obtain a view from this point of inspection. Individuals presume that this access is democratic control rather than seeing the tyranny of this technique.

When an individual internalizes the norms and labels of an institution, s/he unwittingly subjects and disciplines his/herself to the ideals. The prospect of someone seeing him/her counter the prescribed notion, not the punishment itself, becomes the method of surveillance.

This mode keeps an individual in compliance before s/he ever acts contrary to the norm. Eventually, a code of normalcy develops. These discourse-determined norms are then believed to be natural—their existence becomes invisible. Acting in accordance with these veiled ideals, individuals are merely choosing the mode of subjection.

Instead of aligning to the discourse mentality, a “critical interrogation on the present and on ourselves” (PT 132) is needed. Individuals must strive to analyze what is below the surface of everyday “rationality”—the motivations, the power struggles and the origins—while understanding that there is never “access to any complete or definite knowledge...” of an individual’s capacities, his/her role in society, the social institutions, and the ultimate function of society (PT 127). Individuals cannot know what type of situations will arise or when they will occur. No comprehensive cure-all can be used. An individual can only open his/her eyes as much as possible to the panopticism that surrounds him/her and push against his/her limits. In order to open up spaces for an unspecified, undefined freedom, s/he can only squirm to create twist-and-shout latitude within old discourses. Truth becomes dependent on each situation, relative to each person, and open to interpretation.

In his project, Foucault inverts the positivist approach that a definable, ultimate truth is possible, that truth can be arrived at through an objective, unbiased analysis and applied invariably. He shakes up the present order of every day situations, institutional dogma, and academic framework of thought. He opens up possibilities, alternatives for what is feasible. I greeted these new ways of conceptualizing the world with

enthusiasm. When I first read Foucault last year, his mode of thought and analysis of power made me realize that the world around me was politically constructed. That is, I recognized that the rigid definitions of a certain mode of thinking, a certain discourse and its knowledges about others, myself and the world's operations informed my conceptions of truth. In reading Foucault and understanding the implications of his project, I allied myself with post-structuralism.

Post-structuralism, the theoretical camp of which Foucault is a part, does not create a notion of what an individual *should be* or how a society *should be* organized. Instead, it unveils the power plays within the secular and sacred settings when truths are proclaimed. Unlike liberalism, Marxism, and other theoretical approaches founded on inflexible definitions of the nature and role of the self and of society, this tradition recognizes that its ideals are grounded in socially created perceptions. Within its argument, post-structuralism reveals these types of theories as specific discourses that create subjects of and subjects to the particular "knowledge" of the individual and of society, comprehensively defining what an individual is and is not while shaping social routine, associations and structures.

Post-structuralism illustrates how knowledge is power. It shows knowledge's role in shaping how individuals conceptualize the world and create paradigms in separating, categorizing and dichotomizing people and experiences. Knowledge—the particular information, perspective, and understanding of a person, behavior, thought, or experience—informs belief systems. When individuals internalize this know-how, disciplining themselves to it, and seeing these constructions as

natural and Truth, the interplay of knowledge, truth, and power becomes invisible. Bringing this concept to the fore, Foucault demonstrates the underlying power struggles—the truth formations via knowledge. These unnoticed political forces influence society—issues fought for, sentiments declared, and policies enacted. Hence, post-structuralism works within the intricacy of the highly political present in which institutions’ discursive “expertise” orders daily living.

Aware of this discursive authority, Foucault discerns that certainty and truth are relative webs of politics. Foucault’s post-structural project realizes that it is not exempt from discursive tactics. The beauty of Foucault’s theory is its complexity. It recognizes that it is simultaneously better and worse than another discursive practice. It concedes that it, like other discourses, moves from one mode of thinking (one discourse) to another perspective (another discourse), not liberating itself from anything or creating any more freedom. It confesses that it does not have complete access to knowledge and wisdom. It recognizes the politics in truth, of truth in which it is entrenched.

An absolute, unquestioned pro-post-structural stance is to pretend it is exempt from the core of Foucault’s project: the politics of truth. This firm position takes an attitude of universality in prescribing what is the “best” description of self, society, their nature, and how they relate while also affirming the permanence and pervasiveness of discourses. Supporting Foucault’s argument, however, is not to say that post-structuralism is Right; rather, it reveals localized discursive practices that must not be discredited, but questioned daily. And yet, in asserting that social practices, ideas of the self and conceptions of self in

society need to be questioned, a comprehensive prescription is laid down. Nonetheless, the recognition that this instruction comes from subjected, real-life experience keeps it from being completely ideal. The difficulty in talking beyond discursive language—of dialoging in purely immanent terms— gives witness to the prevalence of discourses, their metaphysical claims, and their strong grip on organizing speech and thought. It is evident that the discursive process orders daily thought and action.

Foucault's project in *The History of Sexuality—Volume I: An Introduction* is an extension of his concepts of power-knowledge-truth in discursive practices and how these methods arrange modes of doing and thinking. Foucault recognizes his project in this book as a discourse, one that it is caught up on the notion of sex and trying to unveil existing representations and discussions of sex. Simultaneously, he exposes sexuality as a discourse on sex—a discussion and assertion on the Truth about sex, its forms and purpose. He exposes Victorian repression of sex as not really suppressed at all—personal confession and professional know-how incited individuals to talk about sex and conform to norms of sex. He also shows how the modern push to liberate sex is an extension of the Victorian discursive tactics of confession and categorization. His concept of the formation of power through discursive definitions and know-how and the resulting power-knowledge interaction and reinforcing strategies revolutionize the conceptualization of power struggles, the role of discourse, and the importance of history. Although illustrating how discourses categorize the world, he also provides a method to challenge our environment and create spaces for personal

liberation. Discourses confine, but they also free.

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