Foucault and Extradiscursive Sexuality

Christopher Lane

Superficially, at least, Foucault's May 1979 interview with Frank Mort and Roy Peters covers the same ground as several other interviews he gave in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in which the discussion turns to sexuality and power. In 'The Confession of the Flesh', for instance, conducted a year after *La volonté de savoir* appeared in France, Foucault asserts: 'What the discourse of sexuality was initially applied to wasn't sex but the body, the sexual organs, pleasures, kinship relations, interpersonal relations, and so forth'.[1] This point echoes many passages in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*; Foucault's 1974-75 lectures at the Collège de France, translated recently as *Abnormal*; a wealth of material collected in his *Dits et écrits*; and 'The West and the Truth of Sex', a terse piece published in *Le Monde* in November 1976, which sums up the main argument driving *The History of Sexuality*: 'Western civilization, at least for several centuries, has had little experience of erotic art; it has linked the relations of power, pleasure, and truth in a completely different mode: that of a *scientia sexualis*.' The aim of his multi-volume project, Foucault declared, was thus 'to trace the genealogy of this "science of sex".'[2]

These arguments are now so well known, and have generated so much scholarly debate, that one's first impression on learning that a new, contemporaneous interview has surfaced might be to doubt whether it adds anything to the above list of works. Let me quietly insist, then, that it does.

Certainly, Foucault argues in this interview - doubtless more crudely than elsewhere - that the 'discourse of sexuality' came to function as 'a certain grid … imposed on each person', and that the *scientia sexualis* of the nineteenth century evolved into a 'mechanism … of regulation' that hemmed in every subject (13,14). Yet much of the interview usefully refutes any suggestion that this discourse was seamless, overdetermined, and all encompassing. As Foucault observes, 'discursive practices ... which appear most evident are in fact fragile ... They rest upon particular circumstances, and are often attributable to historical conjunctures, which have absolutely nothing necessary nor definitive about them' (19). Large portions of the interview focus, accordingly, on the way pleasures can escape 'the goal of [discourse in] imprisoning us within determinations'(19).

Although this, too, is a claim familiar to his readers, Foucault's arguments about emancipation and determinism interest me, because in the interview these subjects take several forms, both practical and conceptual, and subtly connect to each other, though Foucault doesn't quite say how or why. He's adept at describing strategies of social emancipation, which he elsewhere calls 'movements of affirmation "starting with" sexuality ... with the apparatus

1. Michel Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh' (10 July 1977), a conversation with Alain Grosrichard, et al, in *Power/ Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon (ed), Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (trans), New York, Pantheon, 1980, p210.

2. Foucault, 'The West and the Truth of Sex' (1976), in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (eds), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp53 and 54.

of sexuality in the midst of which we're caught, and which make it function to the limit; but, at the same time, th[ose movements] are in motion relative to it, disengaging themselves and surmounting it'.[3] Yet his response to Mort and Peters's probing question about 'extra-discursive relations', especially how the latter influence and frame 'relations and practices which exist outside discourse'(16), strikes me as inconclusive and, finally, unsatisfying.

The problem arises because Foucault tends to view extra- and nondiscursive registers as either displaced vehicles of sovereign will or questionable invocations of metaphysical authority. As he put it in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', when elaborating some of the reasons Nietzsche preferred 'liv[ing] *unhistorically*' to adopting an 'antiquarian' or 'monumental' outlook:[4] 'If the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is "something altogether different" behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms'.[5]

Welcome as an approach to metaphysics, because it highlights the latter's reliance on transcendence and false origins, Foucault's genealogical approach is less compelling as an account of sexuality, for what lies 'behind' that phenomenon at the level of causality is too enigmatic and formless for either genealogy or metaphysics properly to identify. Foucault's suggestion that everything outside discourse is implicitly metaphysical also is questionable, not least because he overlooks that the extradiscursive might be intrinsically senseless and unrepresentable. Consequently, these factors escape his notice in *The History of Sexuality*, where he ends up eliding a profound - and arguably insoluble - tension among sexuality, meaning, and nothingness. For the same reason, Foucault is drawn to pleasures that escape the net of discursive regimes, yet these are ones the subject still consciously chooses; they aren't, for him, pleasures that the subject feels driven to experience, or to fantasise about, because they result in unforeseen joy and even ontological harm. If psychoanalysis insists, by contrast, that *jouissance* and the death drive are incommensurate with discourse and associated forms of ideology, it's because the register that determines their effects by definition exceeds the socio-symbolic domain.

It's worth examining this issue in more detail, because it gets to the heart of a long-standing debate between psychoanalytic critics and especially Foucault's Anglo-American readers. To the degree that Foucault considers only elements of sexuality that a regime of discourse can represent, the extra- and nondiscursive become a haunting, unincorporable supplement that highlights his argument's and methodology's limitations. As Jacques-Alain Miller observed to him in 1977, two years before Foucault's interview with Mort and Peters, 'With the introduction of "apparatuses", you want to get beyond discourse. But ... I can't quite see how you could be getting at a "nondiscursive" domain'.[6] Despite acknowledging, then, that discourses of sexuality are incomplete and that the *scientia sexualis* falsely implies otherwise,

3. Foucault, 'Power and Sex' (12 March 1977), an interview with Bernard-Henri Lévy, in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed), New York, Routledge, 1988, pp114-15.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', in *Untimely Meditations*, Daniel Breazeale (ed), R.J. Hollingdale (trans), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp61, 67, original emphasis.

5. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Donald F. Bouchard (ed), Bouchard and Sherry Simon (trans), Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, p142.

6. Jacques-Alain Miller, 'The Confession of the Flesh', op. cit., p197.

Foucault for complex reasons wasn't prepared to say that a dimension of experience escapes discourse, and that it does so because sexuality - 'the vanishing-point of meaning' - is inimical to sense.[7] Put another way, the difficulty that sexuality poses for representation isn't entirely because of discursive forces, though the latter clearly exercise remarkable power. The difficulty is more fundamental and axiomatic, for the determinants influencing sexuality aren't coeval with discourses that struggle to represent it. When Lacan touched on this point, insisting aphoristically, 'The reality of the unconscious is sexual reality - an untenable truth',[8] he meant that the untenability derives from a structural rather than contingent nonalignment between sexuality's ontological and epistemological effects. Foucault softens this issue in the interview, by contrast, when presenting the gap between knowledge and experience as though the interval might one day disappear (13).

That Foucault declined to view sexuality as tied to or even as indirectly influenced by extra- and nondiscursive registers isn't trivial, but has profound implications for a theory and a history of sexuality. To my mind, this omission made Foucault's account of the subject as constituted by discourse and external mandates of power limited, and even quite misleading. Without ignoring, then, why he rejected this line of thought, I shall focus on the edge of his discourse about sexuality, to ask how the extra- and the nondiscursive both influenced and undermined his methodology.

The distance Foucault sought to establish from Marxism and materialism made it possible for him to imagine limited freedom from discourse, but the same impulse also nudged him closer than he acknowledges to his sometime rival, Lacan. For the extradiscursive was Lacan's chief contribution to a theory of determinism in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. He argues there that by limning the *objet a* with impossible, traumatic content, the real, which is extrasymbolic, consistently punctures rather than 'coagulat[es]' with regimes of sexuality (the final verb here is Foucault's, in the interview [18]). Lacan's argument about determinants exceeding both symbolic and imaginary orders enabled him to represent desire historically, that is, without presuming that discourse is the sole means of capturing desire's most counterintuitive effects. In Lacanese, the signifier sutures the subject to the symbolic order, but the latter is so riven by lack - so perforated by the real - that it's impossible to conceive of sexuality's psychic and social histories without ruminating on their associated extradiscursive effects.

When Miller challenged Foucault on this point, urging him to finesse his claims about the historical apparatus of sexuality and the influence of psychoanalysis on the 'regime' of confession, Foucault conceded: 'The strength of psychoanalysis consists in its having opened out on to something quite different [from conventional histories of sexuality], namely the logic of the unconscious. And there sexuality is no longer what it was at the outset'.[9] In distinguishing here between sexuality and the unconscious - and thus between psychoanalysis and its Victorian antecedents - Foucault pinpoints accurately that Freud's profoundly abiological theory of the drives broke

7. Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London, Verso, 1986, p71.

8. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Jacques-Alain Miller (ed), Alan Sheridan (trans), New York, Norton, 1978, p150.

9. Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh', op. cit., pp212-13.

conclusively with earlier hereditary, evolutionary, and psychiatric theories of sexual instincts. As Derrida observes, one way of reading Foucault's now-famous statement in *Madness and Civilization*: 'It is not psychology that is involved in psychoanalysis', is to assert unambiguously that 'there is, in psychoanalysis, *already no more* psychology'.[10] Foucault corroborated such a reading, moreover, when observing in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*:

> The fact remains that in the great family of technologies of sex, which goes so far back into the history of the Christian West, of all those institutions that set out in the nineteenth century to medicalize sex, [psychoanalysis] was the one that, up to the decade of the forties, *rigorously opposed* the political and institutional effects of the perversion-hereditary-degenerescence system [*la psychanalyse ... s'est opposée*, rigoureusement, *aux effets politiques et institutionnels du système perversion-hérédité-dégénérescence*].[11]

We should perhaps point out once more[12] that the English translation of this key passage, which rendered '*psychanalyse*' quite incorrectly as '*psychiatry*', encouraged non-Francophone readers to conflate the exact two elements (Freud and Victorian psychiatry) that Foucault had set out to distinguish. Moreover, Foucault's reference to what preceded the 1940s alludes to not only Freud's death in 1939, but also the intellectual and professional upending - and thus normalisation - of his radical model of sexuality. This, too, is historically correct. On the one hand, the US medical establishment, serving in the 1940s and 1950s as that country's 'official' purveyor of psychoanalysis, turned the latter's theory of the unconscious into an adaptive treatment of the ego. And, on the other hand, Wilhelm Reich's and Herbert Marcuse's drive to popularise versions of Freudianism promulgated misleading (and thoroughly un-Freudian) claims about a 'repressive hypothesis'.

Foucault therefore was right to blame these figures for distorting Freud's arguments. Yet despite underscoring these important distinctions, Foucault nonetheless voices in the interview a form of ambivalence about psychoanalysis that rarely disappears from his other work, though it manifests itself in varied - sometimes-contorted - ways. It does so, moreover, less *despite* than *because* psychoanalysis shares with him a profoundly antipsychologistic trajectory. After he agreed with Miller, for instance, that sexuality, post psychoanalysis, 'is no longer what it was at the outset', Foucault added: 'the important part of [Freud's work] is not the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* but *The Interpretation of Dreams* ... Not the theory of development, nor the sexual secret behind the neuroses or psychoses, but a logic of the unconscious ...' Overturning positivistic models of ontogenesis, the unconscious makes it impossible for subjectivity and sexuality to follow developmental lines. Foucault could leave matters there, but after paraphrasing the theory that 'a sex ... does not' - and need not -

10. Jacques Derrida, '"To Do Justice to Freud": The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis', Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (trans), rept. in *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, Arnold I. Davidson (ed), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997, p65, original emphasis, quoting Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Richard Howard (trans), London, Tavistock, 1967, p198.

11. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, Robert Hurley (trans), New York, Pantheon, 1978, p119; *Histoire de la sexualité, 1: La Volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, pp157-58, my emphases.

12. I discuss the implications of this error in 'Victorian Asymmetry: The Study of Repression and Desire', in *The Burdens of Intimacy: Psychoanalysis and Victorian Masculinity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999, esp. pp12-26.

13. Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh', op. cit. p213.

'correspond in any way to its anatomy', he adds in the interview with Mort and Peters, in apparent criticism, that 'one has only to look [for evidence of this notion] at psychoanalysis, where homosexuality is always defined through the identification with a sex which is not one's own' (15).

The psychoanalytic argument that a person's sexual desires need not 'correspond in any way to [her or his] anatomy' should be welcomed, because it insists that the relation between sex and sexuality is neither inevitable nor predetermined. If 'the sexual [drive] and the sexual object are', in Freud's wonderfully laconic phrase, 'merely soldered together', then the register that forges their connection - and tries to rule out others - is fantasy, not biology.[14] To stress the drive's adventures in this way is clearly disconcerting to many, because the ensuing pleasure may come at the expense of 'sexual identity', a term that henceforth assumes an oxymoronic not ontological status. But Freud's antiessentialism is also worth pursuing because it's inimical to the naïve biologism of his sexological and psychiatric counterparts, whose specious mythologies about the '*anima muliebris in corpore virile inclusa*' - or 'female soul enclosed in a man's body' - prevailed more often as basis for condemnation than apologia but, either way, it fixed the subject's desires in nature.[15]

Because none of this would be news to Foucault, it's all the more surprising that his comments reverse the thesis of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, cited above, by conflating psychoanalysis with sexology and psychiatry. That psychoanalysis considers homosexuality 'always defined through the identification with a sex which is not one's own' bears only a limited relation to Freud's 1910 argument about Leonardo, mostly because that impressionistic essay still relies heavily on sexological presumptions. But Foucault's emphasis on identification doesn't accord with Freud's perspective on homosexuality in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, and elsewhere, where a form of pre-oedipal same-sex identification, almost universalised, becomes the conceptual basis for same-sex desire, sublimation, *and* the social tie. This type of identification is, we might say, the means by which psychoanalysis conceives of sociality and sociability. Almost contemporaneous with this last model, as Kenneth Lewes and others note, was Freud's speculation about homosexuality and same-sex siblings, as well as his provocative but largely inchoate argument about the negative oedipal relation subtending most other forms of sexual desire.[16]

Specifics aside, the broader point about Freud's varied perspective on homosexuality is that the disjuncture between desire and anatomy that he identified - and that Lacan subsequently upheld as an ethic - makes the otherness implied by 'identification with a sex which is not one's own' (15) profoundly disruptive, anti-normative, and anti-identitarian. By defamiliarising gender, that is, otherness makes self-strangeness a ubiquitous crisis or opportunity for all, not the pathology of a few.[17] In this respect, moreover, psychoanalysis shares a trajectory with queer theory, as well as with Foucault's impulse to substitute pleasure for desire. Yet, without his

14. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., James Strachey (ed and trans), London, Hogarth, 1953-74, 7:148.

15. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*, 3rd ed., 6 vols., Philadelphia, F.A. Davis and Co., 1925, 2:310.

16. See Kenneth Lewes, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality*, New York, Meridian, 1988, pp36-43; also John Fletcher, 'Freud and His Uses: Psychoanalysis and Gay Theory', in *Coming on Strong: Gay Politics and Culture*, Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis (eds), London, Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp90-118.

17. See Tim Dean, 'Homosexuality and the Problem of Otherness', *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, op. cit., pp129-38.

recognizing this, pleasure ironically takes Foucault toward the very register - the extradiscursive - that he chose to deprioritise in especially volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*. So when he usefully says in the interview, 'We must be convinced, deep down, that "homosexuality" does not exist' (20), he gestures to not only an imagined end to all sexual identities and classifications, but also, with psychoanalysis, the moment when pleasure - limned by extradiscursive *jouissance* - tries to free desire from any predetermined relationship to gender.

The conceptual implications of this shared interest in what exceeds desire and identity arguably reveal what's at stake, on Foucault's side, in viewing resistance relative less to failure and impossibility than to relations of power.[18] Nevertheless, what's significant about his interview with Mort and Peters is its attention to the extra- and nondiscursive, which hints at what might replace 'the mode of subjection [*mode d'assujettisement*]' that incites desire, when its structures either fail or are displaced.[19] Such moments are significant in Foucault's work, because they show him imagining, however cryptically, a style of interiority unfettered by discourse and power. In his hauntingly beautiful essay 'Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside' (1966), for instance, he voices the near-metaphysical idea that subjectivity, once freed from outside regulation, would lack 'inner conviction [*l'intime conviction*]'.[20] This idea surfaces periodically in his work, especially 'Dream, Imagination, and Existence', his 1954 essay on Binswanger and Freud, and it culminates logically with the demand that subjectivity be let alone, whether to silence, abstraction, or pleasure.[21]

At such moments, one detects a tear in discourse that metaphysics can't repair or sublate, and it's there that another register - call it 'aesthetics', 'the nondiscursive', or even a form of secular 'transfiguration', as Nietzsche used the term - enters the scene, in ways tied, yet never reducible, to discourse. Toward the end of *Madness and Civilization*, for instance, Foucault insists arrestingly that 'by the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself'.[22]

If we view this eloquent claim slightly out of context, as a statement also about the abyssal damage that sexuality wreaks on ontology and meaning, then, as I hinted at the outset, we've not only signalled why invoking metaphysics at such moments is misleading and unnecessary, but also have found a way - as psychoanalysis arguably did - to represent sexuality in a mode that breaks and traverses, rather than merely upholds, the logic of a discursive regime.

18. Christopher Lane, 'The Experience of the Outside: Foucault and Psychoanalysis', in *Lacan in America*, Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed), New York, The Other Press, 2000, p325.

19. Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress' (April 1983), an interview with Paul Rabinow and Hubert Drefus, rept. in *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow (ed), New York, Pantheon, 1984, p353.

20. Foucault, 'Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside', Brian Massumi (trans), in *Foucault, Blanchot*, New York, Zone, 1987, p89; Foucault, *La pensée du dehors*, Paris, Fata Morgana, 1966, 1986, p42.

21. Lane, 'The Experience of the Outside', op. cit., pp330-31.

22. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, op. cit., p288.