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VCFA 3rd Semester - 2nd Mailing

Reading: *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* by Michel Foucault and *The Passion of Michel Foucault* by James Miller.

### Annotated Bibliography

*The History of Sexuality* is a three-volume series written between 1976 and 1984 by French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. The intellectual climate in France at the time was heavily influenced by structuralism; a method of interpretation and analysis of human cognition, behavior, and experience that focused on the meaning being derived from the relationships between the elements within a conceptual system (Miller 69). This climate heavily influenced Foucault's work and he eventually developed an approach to intellectual history based on this influence, which he called archeology of history.

Archeology of history dismissed the importance of the individual thinker and instead emphasised the mind-set and social body that characterized different time periods. Foucault blended the archeology of history with a genealogical approach influenced by Nietzsche. Nietzsche's main theory stated that the concepts we use are rarely fixed, and instead change to suit the needs of the different ages. Following Nietzsche's lead Foucault took this very principle and applied it to the development and history of Western sexuality. The first volume of the trilogy titled *An Introduction* presents Foucault's inquiry into the popular repressive hypothesis, and adopts the antithetical belief that the social construct

of sexuality is fluid and contingent on interaction between historical ideologies, discourses, and power structure relationships (Miller 67-69).

Foucault makes a distinction between a discussion and a discourse; the latter determining who has spoken, how they spoke, in what context, and in reaction to what, observing a complex body of content where language, knowledge, and power are closely linked. Expanding on this elaborated definition of discourse, Foucault draws attention to who decides what is said and the resulting power structures that arise. According to Foucault language and knowledge always have a political edge (Foucault 5). This combination led to a new philosophy on the microphysics of power. Foucault's approach was distinctive from the repressive hypothesis of sexuality, because his interest was embedded in how politics of masses of human bodies are regulated, driving him to question the existing models of power and their origins. These questions were designed to reveal the "discursive fact" of sexuality. That is, how and why sexuality became an object of discussion. Ultimately, his interest is not in sexuality itself, but in our drive for a certain kind of knowledge, a certain perspective, and the kind of power we find in that knowledge.

Foucault's first intention was to investigate the repressive hypothesis which stated Western society repressed sexuality beginning in the 17th century and that sexuality had been something that "was restrained, muted, and carefully confined" (Foucault 3). His findings were in alignment with the repressive hypothesis in that throughout history, sex had been moved into the home and

treated as a private and practical matter that only took place within the institution of marriage. The institution of marriage claimed the discourse on sexuality and it had complete power over what was said, what was not said, who said what, and how this information was shared with the rest of society. Effectively, culture banned any discourse on sexuality that occurred outside the confines of marriage (Foucault 3-5). However Foucault's research demonstrated that the lack of discussion on sex and sexuality actually lead to larger discourses regarding sex within the fields of education, justice, and medicine. During the 18th and 19th centuries with the rise of the Bourgeoisie class, the discourse about and around sex was not confronted with repulsion but it "put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning sex" (Foucault 69).

The Christian pastoral of the 17th century utilized confessions as a way to magnify religious doctrine and tie it to both spiritual and social justice. People no longer confessed only physical deeds, but also spoken and unspoken desires and thoughts - "transform your desires, your every desire, into discourse" (Foucault 21). People were made to be constantly aware of their sexuality in all its forbidden and carefully neutralized state. The social construct of sexuality was everywhere and on everyone's minds and thus began to extend beyond the realm of religious confession. In the 18th century sex became something to be studied rationally, analyzed, and classified; it became a public interest and an investment. Population regulation; birth rates, fertility rates, and illegitimate births all became an important object of public surveillance. Foucault pinpoints other

areas of discourse in medicine, psychiatry, and criminal justice (Foucault 4). Laws became more specific to illicit types of sexual acts, studies of sex became more frequent, and these specialized fields employed technical language and expertise that provided an unquestionable authority over their subjects (Miller 25).

This development was a direct result of the changing relationship between power and sex. Sex became an object of knowledge, and was exposed to the kind of impartial examination used in the sciences which created a multiplicity of discourses on sex (Foucault 33). Foucault identified four applications involved in this employment of power; child sexuality, sexuality relating to identity, the power dynamics of "spirals of power and pleasure", and a sexually saturated society; all of which were directed toward propagating sexual perversion and the discourses around sex (Foucault 46-53).

First, the study of child sexuality created a profusion of engagement, by bringing in, not only children, but the parents and family matters, teachers and pedagogical developments, and doctors with an increase in the medicalization of sex. Second, Foucault saw a connection to the concept of sexuality as a fundamental aspect of who we are. One's sexuality became a key to interpreting one's personality, one's behavior, and one's identity. Third, Foucault draws connections between the power relationships within the expanded field of medicine and psychiatry; the "spirals of power and pleasure." Foucault believed that by focusing on the examination and study of sexuality the

observer and observed entered into an intimate contact which encouraged both the observer and the observed to exchange power and pleasure. Fourth, Foucault finds that the multiplicity of sexual discourses had led to a sex saturated society, which created a connection between sexuality and everything else (Foucault 44-49).

Foucault believed that knowledge was never just a collection of information, but instead knowledge, discourse, and power were intrinsically linked. Through the "will to knowledge" or the drive to gain knowledge we increased our power over the subject of sex and sexuality became the new will of knowledge (Foucault 72-73). What Foucault saw in the medicalization and spread of sexuality is that it mattered a great deal exactly how different sexualities manifested themselves. Sexual proclivities or "perversions" were identities.

In the 19th century the discourse on sex flourished and became a problem of truth, but it was important that this knowledge took the side of social morality. Learned discourse on sex was full of exaggerations, biases, and lies that supported Victorian and Bourgeois perspectives. Rather than emphasize the biases, the learned discourse on sex was treated as a truth viewed through the *sexualis lens* (Foucault 66-69).

In the 19th century, psychiatrists brought the practice and ideology of confession and scientific methods together to create a "confessional science" of sex. By creating certain codified methods; hypnosis, free association, and

examination, sexual confessions became regulated which allowed them to be quantified, interpreted, analyzed, and studied; essentially they were therapeutic and an official medical procedure. Thus, the tradition of confession was combined with scientific discourse to create our modern concept of sexuality (Foucault 67-68).

From the 17th century through the 19th century society forced sex into discourse, by which, we hoped to find both knowledge and pleasure through a sustained relationship with sex and sexuality. Foucault saw sexuality as more than just a biological function and an economic interest. He saw it as a hidden secret, a private act, that needed to be investigated in order to understand it. He saw it as a way to understand our true identities and experience power and pleasure. Foucault used the idea of power in a political context, to draw genealogical connections between the relationships of individuals, ideas, and institutions within society. Power was the force that caused these relationships to change and multiply. Sexuality wasn't a thing that was then repressed by power, it was a social construct that channeled a variety of different power relations. The modern concept of sexuality built upon this power network and its multiplicity. Sexuality was built by the strategies and relationships and served as a network that joined together physical sensations, linguistics, and power toward the formation of specialized knowledge, political controls and resistance. Sexuality was a social construct built on a number of different relationships;

between psychiatrists and their patients, parents and their children, between the law and criminals.

The repressive hypothesis stated that for centuries sex had been repressed by ecclesiastical, social, and economic institutions that wanted to regularize productive activities. Sex, in Foucault's perspective, was not an autonomous force; it was an intellectual and social construction to which the body and its sensations and pleasures have been reduced. Sex was made into a secret, a mystery, and the word itself concealed experiences, feelings, and sensations that could then be studied and analyzed; all in the pursuit of discovering the secret about sex. Sex as that hidden reality, that biological necessity, that symbol of our identity, was to Foucault no more than artifice. It has been created and manipulated to delude us about the nature of social power and its duality; repression and taboo. This deception blinds us to the fact that the notion of sex is the means by which "power [maintains] its grip on bodies and their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures" (Foucault 106-112).

Here, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault described a network embracing canonical law, Christian pastoral practice, civil law, medicine, and psychiatry, all of which work to codify the forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures of the body.

## Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. 1st American ed. ed., Pantheon Books, 1978.

Miller, Jim. *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. Simon & Schuster, 1993.