

Elizabeth Ashkinazi

PHILO 380

Linda Alcoff

3/28/22

History of Sexuality Essay

Foucault believes that there is too much naturalization taking place in the discourse about sex. Because sex is often regarded as an act precipitated by primal urges and ideas of gender essentialism, (due to the influence of Freudianism in the discursive operations of modern society) Foucault attempts to demystify the conversation about sex instead of simply relegating it to being the result of biological drives that we can't seem to shake off. The mystery surrounding sex also gives rise to this idea of "a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely" (p. 103). This power, (whether it is the superego or a similar function) attempts to make sense of these drives and to subdue and sublimate them in socially acceptable ways. Sex in the modern era is to be put under a microscope in the confessional and laboratory all the same -- engaging with the discourse of sex in a way that renders it taboo. The scientia sexualis has made it so that the practice of sex as a concept has been reduced to urges beyond our level of awareness and even control. Moreover, Foucault believes that we ought to historicize sexual practices rather than medicalize them. Sexuality is wrought with power. Power is distributed from different points in sexual relations. Power percolates societally wherein the perverse and hypersexual are vilified, less for moral reasons than for political ones. Foucault holds that sexuality is a nexus of power/knowledge, and it can be articulated as "the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the

incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power” (p. 105). Sexuality, therefore, is an exercise in which power relations come to be realized -- “...between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population” (p. 103). This is because sexuality is not merely about the practice of sex at all. The libidinality of daily practices involve transferences of power. In turn, “sexuality is the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology” (p. 127). Foucault grounds the importance of the libidinal in the various political relations that exist. Because sexuality involves the interplay of power/knowledge, the same argument that Foucault makes in regard to the bidirectional, decentralized effect that power has applies to power relations in the realm of sexuality -- everyone is an active participant in the precipitation of power. Thus, the topic of pleasure is rendered political, as the incitement of it may promote the flow of power -- be it the pleasure of confessing your sins, listening to them, discussion of all things sex-related, and so on. Pleasures associated with the preoccupation with sex are sublimated into socially acceptable practices, and the obsession with sex in the era of the *scientia sexualis* (and most notably the categorization and labelling aspects of it) results in the discursive preoccupation with it in the public imaginary. In essence, Foucault believes the idea of sexual repression to be false, as history has seen a massive discursive boom with the way in which sexuality is discussed -- this, in turn, imbues sexuality with an undeniable gravity and facilitates the flow of power in the realm of sexuality, thereby inciting more pleasure in directing our attention to it. Ultimately, Foucault is concerned with the way power infiltrates the discourse of sexuality -- where it is found, in what relations, through what historical framework, and who

has the final say in establishing knowledges and truths about the subject of sexuality. All of this is to say that the liberation of sexuality as a discourse is a project that requires our attention. With the emphasis placed on studying and pathologizing drives, perversions, and deviation, it is worth noting that all of this fuss surrounding sexuality can simply be contextualized within a socio-historical understanding of how power operates in the domain of sexuality rather than relegated to biological workings which produce innate differences. The power exercised within and over sexuality rendered the discourse of sexuality all the more viable and solidified sexuality as an object of close analysis -- "Power operated as a mechanism of attraction; it drew out those peculiarities over which it kept watch" (p. 45). Instead of viewing sexuality as something that requires control, examination, identitarianism and subduing, it is more useful to understand it in the context of historical interests, experimentation and flows.