

Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (1976)
 Subtitle in French: *La Volonté de Savoir* (*The Will to Knowledge*)

The usual story about sex over the past 3 centuries or so: the “repressive hypothesis”

Repressive hypothesis	Foucault’s response
1. Since 17 th century, sex has been repressed and silenced by power, reduced to single permitted form (heterosexual couple for procreation) (3-4)	Instead of silence, there has been a “steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex” (18). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have a “will to knowledge” / “will to truth” about sex (53-57, 77-80), reflected in our <i>scientia sexualis</i> (science of sex) (57-73): e.g., discourses in medicine, psychology / psychiatry, pedagogy, criminal justice, demography, and elsewhere (25-30) • “Confessional” practices are a crucial part of getting such scientific knowledge of sex (58-67).
2. Power operates on sex only negatively, by prohibiting, rejecting, hindering, blocking (83-84)	A new kind of power has developed in the last few hundred years: bio-power. This is focused on engendering and managing life, in part through regulating and normalizing sex (rather than prohibiting it) (136-150).
3. We should liberate ourselves from repressive power by recognizing, expressing and acting on our natural and true sexual identities, because repression of these is wrong and harmful (5-8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexuality is a product of bio-power and the modern discourses on sexuality, not an inner, true, natural identity (68, 105). • Attempts to liberate our sexuality from repression support the operations of bio-power in encouraging us to believe in, speak about, and act on the idea of a “true” sexuality; they are not a way to achieve freedom in a deep sense (60, 131, 158). • Repression of sex can indeed be problematic, but does Foucault also suggest that the production of sexuality through bio-power is problematic in some way as well? If so, how?

Freud & Foucault on psychoanalysis as confession

The pact that must be established between analyst and patient: “complete candour on one side and strict discretion on the other. This looks as though we were only aiming at the post of a secular father confessor. But there is a great difference, for what we want to hear from our patient is not only what he knows and conceals from other people; he is to tell us too what he does *not* know.... He is to tell us not only what he can say intentionally and willingly, what will give him relief like a confession, but everything else as well that his self-observation yields him, everything that comes into his head, even if it is *disagreeable* for him to say it, even if it seems to him *unimportant* or actually *nonsensical*. ...[This] thus put[s] us in a position to conjecture his repressed unconscious material and to extend, by the information we give him, his ego’s knowledge of his unconscious” (Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* 51-52 (1938)).

“The confession is a ritual ... that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile ...” (Foucault 61-62).

Freud & Foucault on secrets

“If it is true that the causes of hysterical disorders are to be found in the intimacies of the patient’s psycho-sexual life, and that hysterical symptoms are the expression of their most secret and repressed wishes, then the complete exposition of a case of hysteria is bound to involve the revelation of those intimacies and the betrayal of those secrets” (Freud, *Dora* 2).

“... this oft-stated theme, that sex is outside of discourse and that only the removing of an obstacle, the breaking of a secret, can clear the way leading to it, is precisely what needs to be examined. Does it not partake of the injunction by which discourse is provoked? Is it not with the aim of inciting people to speak of sex that it is made to mirror, at the outer limit of every actual discourse, something akin to a

secret whose discovery is imperative, a thing abusively reduced to silence, and at the same time difficult and necessary, dangerous and precious to divulge?" (Foucault 34).

Freud & Foucault on the spontaneous upward movement of what is repressed

"We may suppose that the repressed exercises a continuous pressure in the direction of the conscious, so that this pressure must be balanced by an unceasing counter-pressure" (Freud, "Repression" (1915)); "...the unconscious ... has a natural 'upward drive' and desires nothing better than to press forward across its settled frontiers into the ego and so to consciousness" (Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1938))

"The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation" (Foucault 60).

Foucault on the political role of intellectuals

"[Here] is an observation that people often make of my thought: you do not ever say what the concrete solutions to the problems you pose could be; you do not make proposals. I absolutely will not play the part of one who prescribes solutions. ... My role is to address problems effectively, really: and to pose them with the greatest possible rigor, with the maximum complexity and difficulty so that a solution does not arise all at once because of the thought of some reformer or even in the brain of a political party. The problems that I try to address, these perplexities of crime, madness, and sex which involve daily life, cannot be easily resolved. It takes years, decades of work carried out at the grassroots level with the people directly involved; and the right to speech and political imagination must be returned to them" (Foucault, "Discourse on Power" (interview from 1978), *Remarks on Marx* 157-159).

"... [I]f I don't ever say what must be done, it isn't because I believe that there's nothing to be done; on the contrary, it is because I think that there are a thousand things to do, to invent, to forge, on the part of those who, recognizing the relations of power in which they're implicated, have decided to resist or escape them" (Ibid. 174).

"It is absolutely true that when I write a book I refuse to take a prophetic stance, that is, the one of saying to people: here is what you must do—and also: this is good and this is not. I say to them: roughly speaking, it seems to me that things have gone this way; but I describe those things in such a way that the possible paths of attack are delineated. ... I would like to produce some effects of truth which might be used for a possible battle, to be waged by those who wish to wage it, in forms yet to be found and in organizations yet to be defined" ("Clarifications on the Question of Power" (interview from 1978), *Foucault Live* 262).

Foucault on sexual identity

There is a problem when "people think that they have to 'uncover' their 'own identity,' and that their own identity has to become the law, the principle, the code of their existence; if the perennial question they ask is 'Does this thing conform to my identity?' [The notion of sexual identity] has been very useful, but it limits us and I think we have (and can have) a right to be free" (Foucault, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity" (interview from 1982), *Foucault Live* 385). "Sexuality is something that we ourselves create—it is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it's a possibility for a creative life" (ibid., 382).

Foucault, Michel. *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*. Ed. Lotringer, Sylvère. 2nd ed. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996.

Foucault, Michel. *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. Trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.