

Reassessing the Productive Hypothesis: How Foucault Taught us to Think About Sex & Self

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Dethroning the Repressive Hypothesis

Perhaps no moment in the voluminous and justly celebrated writings of Michel Foucault is more famous than the opening pages of *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, where the French theorist overturns one of the central narratives of twentieth-century culture: the repressive hypothesis.¹ In the opening lines of the volume, he frames the hypothesis as a story we tell ourselves, one that does a specific kind of cultural work: “For a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today. Thus, the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality” (HOS1, 3). The narrative put forward by the repressive hypothesis is, at once, self-perpetuating, contradictory, and smug. Through an endless invocation of Victorian repression and its persistence in twentieth-century culture, writers, bohemians, intellectuals, and members of the counterculture could struggle heroically against sexual repression, speaking the truth of sex against a veritable wall of silence, disapproval, and

effacement. From such a vantage, the Victorians were to be pitied, a sad, prudish lot whose sexual repression fundamentally limited their ability to understand the very foundations and limitations of the culture they created.

Foucault's rejection of the repressive hypothesis is precise in its articulation. His critique is fundamentally about the productivity of discourse. The Victorian obsession with sex and with rooting out its pernicious manifestations (which, like early-modern sodomy laws encompassed just about everything that was not matrimonial missionary style sex or reproductive sex—i.e. almost everything interesting) did not produce a paucity of discussions about sex, but its opposite: a veritable explosion of discourses about sex, from the pedagogical to the scientific, and an obsession with finding it everywhere. Within such a framework, sex was not repressed so much as it was brought into a network of productive power, where obsessions with limiting or controlling an activity generated the proliferation of the very activity itself. Thus, the twentieth century rejection of Victorian repression was not so much of a revolution around sex, but a perpetuation, even if the moral polarities are reversed, of the same form of productive power.

Foucault's argument here is notable for several reasons. It is perhaps the paradigmatic instance of how his arguments more generally are structured. It takes a position that is presented as intellectual common sense, especially among the ostensibly enlightened and progressive, and demonstrates its fundamental conceptual inadequacy. It then proposes a counter argument that reframes not only the period under discussion but our very conceptions of how power works. Finally, it uses this counter-argument to elaborate a counter-history throughout the rest of the book, in which a period, whose coordinates have long been thought as settled, emerges as radically fresh, alive, and strange. While I sometimes disagree with Foucault's conclusions, this version of revisionist historicism that he practices in the histories and in his many lectures at the *Collège de France* is exemplary as a model of theoretical analysis and genealogical reconstruction. If the power of such revisionist histories is to provide a new understanding of the past that can mobilize new interventions in the present, one of its potential downsides is, in the name of rejecting leftist and liberal platitudes and clichés, to find oneself with strange bedfellows, giving power to right-wing or capitalist arguments. While Foucault, from all accounts, was not opposed to strange bedfellows, some of his intellectual bedfellows could be complicated, such as his support for the Iranian revolution or the ways in which his account of the self seems to lend itself to the emerging discourse of neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s.² Yet, while there have been productive and powerful criticisms of the limits of Foucault's political vision, some of the criticisms misread his lack of taking a moral stance, something central

to the very practice of genealogy and one that is crucial to opening up the intellectual terrain that he maps so well, as an endorsement of the thing described.³ Rather than condemning him for this tendency, I think the initial suspension of ethical or moral judgment is a crucial feature of critical theory, one shared not only by Foucault, but also Marx, and Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson.⁴ It allows one to think past the immediacies of moral injunctions and to see common sense in any given era as malleable and an effect rather than the cause of larger structural and historical dynamics.

The critique of the repressive hypothesis also comes at a crucial moment in Foucault's intellectual trajectory. It is positioned between his account of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* and his elaboration of a very different conception of power, what he terms biopower and its social elaboration, biopolitics, in *The History of Sexuality Volume One* and in three different volumes of his posthumously published lectures.⁵ It represents a crucial point in which he shifts his focus from a politics of the individual body to one of the social aggregate or population. The critique of the repressive hypothesis also comes near another shift in his thinking, this one more visible in the work he published during his lifetime. This is the shift from considering larger formations of power in the era of modernity to analyzing, in the later volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, a microphysics of self and self-governance. While these two shifts may seem opposed, I will argue below that there is a way in which they can be understood as complimentary rather than in contradiction.

The Productive Hypothesis

Foucault does not merely undo one master narrative or hypothesis in the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, he also posits a hypothesis of his own. While he never names it as such, we may term this hypothesis "the productive hypothesis." This is the argument, elaborated at length in "The Deployment of Sexuality" section of *Volume One*, argues that nearly all accounts of power as negative, repressive, and constraining miss the mark at getting what is at the heart of its workings, particularly in contemporary societies (HOS1, 75-131). The target of Foucault's critique is, as often has been noted, psychoanalysis and Marxist theory (as well as Hegelianism more generally), with their emphasis on negative power and the force of repression (with psychic or social). One might point out that Foucault never names or cites his antagonists (he was a master, *avant la lettre*, of the subtweet), but the target of his critique is less individual psychoanalytic and Marxist thinkers (who often have a more complex understanding of power than the straw-person one that Foucault

articulates), than the way in which such an understanding of power and its relationship to sex and sexuality has become codified into a kind of unthinking common sense, not only in intellectual circles, but in activist circles, and the culture more broadly. His target is not so much Freud or Lacan, but the bad version of Freudianism and ego psychology that was codified in midcentury psychoanalysis. Similarly, it is not Marx who is the enemy. Rather it is the reification of an intellectual tradition within various official versions of the Communist Party, especially the French CP, of which Foucault was once a member and left due to its support of Stalin's antisemitic "doctors plot" and the general homophobia present in the party. .

Even as his arguments were not directed at individual thinkers, they have had significant impact on the larger traditions at which they were directed. Both psychoanalysis and Marxism have needed to confront the challenge represented by the productive hypothesis and a Foucauldian understanding of the workings of power and the social field has become profoundly influential. It not only provides an alternative language and framework for thinking about the social, but it has led to various fusions of the Foucauldian position with positions to which it is ostensibly opposed. Thus, Foucault and Marxism have been combined by a range of thinkers from the Italian autonomists and post-autonomists (who also often bring Deleuze into the mix as well) to social thinkers of state formation and neoliberalism who combine Foucault, especially on biopolitics, and Marxism. Similarly, queer theory has typically depended on a complex mix of Foucault and psychoanalysis to advance its arguments.

Foucault's account of power as productive is perhaps most effective in describing forms of soft power that work alongside of, as well as in contradiction to, its more repressive manifestations. One can think of Althusser's distinction between Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) here.⁶ Without flattening the very different conception of how productive power works in both cases (ideology for Althusser, with the forms of *méconnaissance* that it generates, and Foucault's concept of discourses as tied to institutions, bodies, and aggregates, and productive of various truths), these models echo each other in their emphasis on the centrality of language practices, institutions, and constructions of selfhood to the workings not only of a supposed cultural superstructure, but to that of social reproduction itself. Althusser makes this link explicit in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* and his model of the twinned use of repressive and ideological power (which he in turn borrowed from Gramsci) provides perhaps the best account of the need to think these two forms of power together.

Sex and the Productive Hypothesis

While Foucauldian accounts of productive power have mixed in generative ways with Marxist accounts of social reproduction and (via Foucault's account of neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*) the reorganization of all aspects of society around the logic of human capital, its impact on conceptions of sex and sexuality in the present has been perhaps even more pervasive, but less salutary. As I mentioned above, in queer theory, the productive hypothesis has mixed with psychoanalysis to generate an account of power that is both productive of various subjectivities, desires, practices, and embodiments and is crucially decentered, a product of the unconscious which has been produced by repression and is "extimate" (to use a concept from Lacan, meaning an intimate exteriority—the otherness as the center of the subject).⁷ Yet this conception of sex and sexuality has seemingly morphed in the present, with the decline of psychoanalytic models as a framework in theory and the ever-growing proliferation of positive and increasingly micrological categories of identity and selfhood. The understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality in the twenty-first century has shifted ground.

If anything, our understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality have become even more indebted to the productive hypothesis in the present. Power does not seem to negate when it comes to sexuality, instead it productively proliferates. Sexual and gender identities morph and proliferate in everyday life, social media, and critical theory. Many of these developments are salutary, particularly as forms of gender identification and sexual identification challenge older, constraining binaries and enable a vision of the gendered and sexual world that is affirmative of a much broader range of identifications, from transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary, and intersex ones to asexuality, pansexuality, and aromanticism (to mention only a few). Yet, as productive (in both senses) as these developments have been, Foucault might be surprised, or at least slightly skeptical, of the way in which his theory of power has manifested in the present.

Foucault saw identity as a central productive feature of power. His account of the evolution of an ethics or aesthetic practice of the self is central to the long trajectory charted by volumes two through four of the *History of Sexuality*.⁸ Similarly, in *Volume One*, his account of the nineteenth-century emergence of homosexuality as an identity increasingly individualized and separated from a much longer history of homoerotic acts and unnamed or differently named collectivities chart the modern emergence of identity. Yet, he also saw the category as thoroughly constraining (at

least in Volume One). Sexuality became the locus of truth in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth century sexological discourse:

‘Sexuality’: the correlative of that slowly developed discursive practice which constitutes the *scientia sexualis*. The essential features of this sexuality are not the expression of a representation that is more or less distorted by ideology, or of a misunderstanding caused by taboos; they correspond to the functional requirements of a discourse that must produce its truth. (68)

This passage succinctly captures Foucault's conception of truth, not as a transhistorical or transcultural essence, but precisely as that which is produced by historical and cultural discourses. It is not ideology, because there is no material base with which it is in contradiction, but it functions much like ideology in Marxist theory. Truth is a product of discourse, and it works to produce what it describes. It is thus a productive form of power in precisely the way Foucault describes it. To the degree that it is constraining, it is so not via repression but via exclusion. Because certain truths are ascendent other ones are necessarily excluded or backgrounded. Foucault talks about this in his inaugural address to the Collège de France, “The Discourse on Language” as a process of ‘rarefaction’ (221).⁹ It is also implicit in his distinction between different shifts in dominant formations around sexuality (for example the slow shift from acts to identities in *Volume One*). In this framework, power works to produce that which it delimits and describes.

The Legacy of the Productive Hypothesis

Foucault's formulation of the productive hypothesis was central to much of the first wave of queer theory in the 1980s and 90s. In the writings of both Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, discourses were productive of the very identities that they tried to negate, castigate, or forbid. In *In Between Men*, Sedgwick located homoerotic desires in texts that were organized around what she termed homosexual panic and homosocial competition.¹⁰ In the very name of heteronormativity, then, various forms of homoerotic desire and identification were produced. For all the ways in which it differs, Butler's *Gender Trouble* is similarly invested in the way in which homosexuality is produced by the very juridical constitution of the homo/heterosexual divide (in which, as Butler notes in a properly Derridian fashion, the concept of homosexuality preceded, as a dangerous supplement, the idea of heterosexuality).¹¹ Both these thinkers were not only invested in a Foucauldian model of discursive productivity but also a psychoanalytic account

of desire and subject formation. This combination proved to be a powerful framework for queer theory, enabling the charting of non-normative subjectivities and desires within and against the very workings of normative power.

The embrace of Foucault's conception of discursive productivity in early queer theory enabled a decisive shift in the theoretical framework that underwrote academic and popular understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast to midcentury theorists, such as Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, and struggles around sexual repression, encompassing everything from gay liberation and second wave feminism to what was termed the sexual revolution, queer theory and activism recognized the productivity of power, working to embrace the very categories by which a culture had stigmatized various forms of queer behavior and subjectivity, and destabilize the very distinctions (say between homosexuality and heterosexuality) by which heteronormative power operated.¹² It also recognized that sexual speech acts and sexual discourse were not uniformly liberating. Instead, their very proliferation produced new sites of power both as possibility and constraint. Similarly, because of queer theory's parallel embrace of psychoanalysis, it emphasized not only the discursive productivity of subjectivities but the constitution of desire in relationship to discourse.

However, as queer theory and discourse has transformed in ways both powerful (the recognition of the centrality of trans, nonbinary, and asexual experience and theory to any proper account of queerness) and suspect (the transformation of what was an umbrella and intentionally unstable category, queerness, central to both theory and practice into an ever more reified, individualized, and taxonomic conceptions of identity), it has largely jettisoned its relationship to psychoanalysis and transformed its relationship to Foucault and his thought. As I have argued elsewhere, much of this transformation can be attributed to the concomitant emergence of neoliberalism as a dominant economic logic, one Foucault masterfully, if presciently, chronicles in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Within a neoliberal framework, subjectivity becomes tied to human capital, or the turning of the human subject into an "entrepreneur of himself" (*Birth*, 226). Identity becomes bound up with the production of oneself and one's brand, to use internet lingo. To be on-brand, one needs to present oneself in the right way, to differentiate oneself from the other similar brands on the market, and to compete with contrasting brands. At first, it may seem a stretch, and an uncharitable one at that, to apply such a logic to the generation of queer microidentities, given that taking up a queer identity involves forms of social risk and potential phobic condemnation that seem to work against the market logic of neoliberalism. Why take on a brand that could damage your human capital rather than maximize it? Yet, here is where Foucault's concept of the

proliferation as well as the rarefaction of discourse becomes especially important. Discursive frameworks have ways of multiplying themselves and becoming a repeating logic that unites often disparate cultural practices and materials. As Foucault argues in *Volume One*, discourses are “tactically polyvalent” and can be taken up as points of resistance to dominant modes of power even as they often mirror or reflect those modes (HOS1, 101). It is important not to be cynical about this. The use of contemporary neoliberal rhetorics of identity and self-branding by queer subjects in the present does challenge dominant power in specific ways, creating sites of identified difference and community that resist heteronormative dictates. Yet, it is also important to attend to the way in which creating such a reverse discourse also reinforces the very discursive logic within which it struggles. Thus, while affirming one’s own microidentity may fly in the face of the typical generation of human capital for the ends of being economically secure, it does give one access to other forms of symbolic capital, the ones that are particularly powerful in online spaces. Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, it also shuts down the ability to think and organize differently. This is the crucial dimension of rarefaction that Foucault describes. Discourses are organized around silences and elisions as much as dominant logics and frameworks.

While the embrace of microidentities in contemporary queer activism and some theory may produce forms of resistant subjectivity, by their very logic it is difficult for such identities to create larger forms of solidarity, the larger forms that the signifier queer was once called upon to help enact. Instead, what we often get, especially as this logic intersects with the algorithmic production of identity and discourse online in general, is a series of circumscribed identities and microcommunities which often are articulated in opposition to other queer identities and microcommunities. The emphasis here is first on the self and its presentation and only secondarily on producing mass political movements to challenge heteronormativity cisnormativity, and, in alliance with other movements, undo systematic racism, sexism, and economic inequality.

Rethinking Foucault and Queerness for the Neoliberal Moment

In what remains of this essay, I want to return to key Foucauldian concepts, as well as to concepts that are part of theoretical approaches that are often seen as the ones Foucault criticized (particularly, in this case, psychoanalysis, but also Marxism), in order to articulate a model of power and subjectification that can prove to be more resistant to the neoliberal status quo. Some of this will involve reclaiming the unfinished work of queer theory in its initial articulation. Another aspect of it will be to

reclaim aspects of Foucault's hermeneutics that have been ignored or deemphasized in the present. Finally, it will also examine the way in which certain of Foucault's concepts are ambiguous in their initial articulation and make them easily appropriable to neoliberal rhetorics (even as he was a powerful anatomist of neoliberalism). For this last set of categories I will propose alternate theoretical concepts.

Much work in queer theory has derived its impetus and methodology from the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. As I noted above, Foucault's work on the production of sexuality as a discursive and institutional form of truth in the late nineteenth century is central to Judith Butler's account of the juridical production and regulation of sexuality in *Gender Trouble*. David Halperin's assertion of the historicist limits of the concept of homosexuality in *One Hundred Years of Sexuality* is similarly indebted to Foucault's genealogies of homoeroticism.¹³ While Halperin's emphasis on a short historical time span for the existence of modern homosexuality has been rightly criticized for effacing the way in which queer collectivities and identities (including those formed around male homoeroticism) preexisted this nineteenth-century genealogy, central to both Butler and Halperin was the notion of identity as a double-edged product of discourse, one that was constraining as well as empowering. While being able to give a name to homosexuality presented the possibility of collective resistance to a broadly homophobic set of cultural and medico-juridical practices, it also had the effect of tying these same identities to very forms of power that they were resisting. Recasting Foucault's argument in relationship to György Lukács' Marxist account of reification in the early twentieth century, Kevin Floyd has made a similar point about the doubleness of the reification of sexuality in the twentieth century.¹⁴ On one level, the reification of sexuality, like that of the worker and the lifeworld more generally under industrial capitalism, fragmented and made autonomous what was initially folded into a larger normative conception of sexuality in relationship to pre-industrial lifeways. This fragmentation formed in relationship to the production of single-sexed spaces (whatever sexed or gendered diversity may have existed within them) in which sexuality and desire could be detached from the family unit and social reproduction and emerge as a locus of autonomous and named formation around collective identity. Similarly, the reification of the body that is central to Lukács' description of the experience of the factory worker also could work to eroticize these newly objectified bodies, such that it promoted same sex desire.¹⁵ Floyd's rearticulation of the concept suggests the productivity of reification in a way that parallels Foucault's account of the productivity of discourse around sexuality. For Floyd, while reification can initially minoritize gay identity, it also holds out the possibility for a universalization of a set of struggles

around sexuality, one that dovetails with the initial conception of queer articulated by Eve Sedgwick as majoritarian.¹⁶

Floyd's reworking of Foucault's argument through Lukács is admirably dialectical, demonstrating the political possibilities as well as limitations enabled by the concept of reification. It is also nicely historicized, tracing the emergence of a positive conception of reification out of its initially negative formation under Taylorism, one that had a specific efficacy in the term queer. Yet, Floyd's argument, in its historical and dialectical specificity, also indicates the limits of his (and Foucault's) account of the double valence of power in its ability to enable as well as circumscribe. In terms of historiography, Floyd's account of same sex desire as forming via the dynamics of early twentieth-century reification has been complicated by the recent work of Christopher Chitty, who argues that homosexuality's collective formation predates industrialism and is tied (in a similar way) to the production of same sex workforces in agrarian capitalism as it formed with the emergence of the capitalist world-economy in the long 16th century.¹⁷ Thus, while collective identity in both Floyd's and Chitty's queer Marxism is tied to labor formations and the production of class, something that Rosemary Hennessy has also cogently demonstrated, Floyd's account of reification may have less to do with collective naming and more, as he also argues, with a certain autonomization of desire and objectification of the male body.¹⁸ Moreover, while Floyd's argument is persuasive in relationship to the formation of a collective and non-minoritarian understanding of identity in early queer theory, the proliferation of microidentities, and concomitant micropolitics, in the present moment suggests a less sanguine fate for the reification of sexuality.

Central to Lukács account of reification is the argument that knowledge itself becomes reified in Taylorist (and post-Taylorist) capitalism. The ability to think across categories of knowledge (and thus of difference, I might add) becomes circumscribed by the instrumentalization of knowledge in relationship to the workplace (the separation of management from labor being the most important instance) and in relationship to intellectual productivity in general. This is the moment of the codification of the disciplines, where critical rationality becomes instrumental rationality and different fields of knowledge become answerable only to themselves. While, reification can be productive of collective forms of desire and identity, its general tendency is toward the ever-greater differentiation and circumscription of the lifeworld. It is also toward the specialization of knowledge, which becomes unable to think across categories, disciplines, and subject positions. Given that there was always a danger of the delimitation of knowledge and the reduction of it to partial truths in the dynamic of reification, the benefits of an

emergent collectivity forming in relationship to it needs to be dialectically understood as both empowering but also as limiting. While the concept of queer initially provided just such a fixed locus of politicized collectivity, the concept itself has transformed significantly since its initial articulation in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, where queer began its theoretical life (and its activist life as well) as an anti-minoritarian position that was about destabilizing identity categories and producing new forms of cross-identity political alliance, by the time we have reached our current position in the twenty-first century, queer has become merely a stand-in for an ever-growing number of identities and positionalities. While one used to be able to oppose the ever-growing list of signifiers collected under the umbrella formation of LGBTQUIA+ to queer as precisely a signifier that refused a fixed and minoritized reference, the two linguistic formations are now seen as basically interchangeable. When I ask my students what queer stands for, I get metastasizing list of ever more specific identities. While one might argue that this is not that different from what the signifier queer does, by grouping a range of identities together, the identities so named do not seem to form a collectivity so much as an atomized series of discrete positions.

This transformation of the meaning of queer suggests that the reification of sexuality pointed to by Floyd has transformed into what Jordy Rosenberg has called the molecularization of sexuality, in which a micrological physics of power accompanies the emergence of the (sexual) body itself as a new locus of capitalist accumulation.¹⁹ Within such a framework, the individual identity becomes the social container within which accumulation and power operate. The ability to posit forms of transindividual collectivity and solidarity becomes more difficult. One needs to not merely dialecticize atomization (which is perhaps the best way to read the proliferation of microidentities around sexuality) but think against its very logic.

To do so, we need to return to two key concepts in Foucault's work on sexuality. The first is the concept of self and how it is defined in relationship to the flesh in the relatively continuous history articulated by volumes two through four of the *History of Sexuality*. The second is returning to the opposition between the repressive and productive hypothesis in order to rethink the two forms of power as more intimately linked than the account of them Foucault provides in the *History of Sexuality Volume One*.

Self, Flesh, and Libido

Foucault famously switched the scope, focus, and approach of his research between the publication of the *History of Sexuality Volume One* and the other three volumes in the series. The first volume was focused on the modern period (primarily the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and articulated a number of relatively autonomous theoretical claims. While Foucault employed them to frame the history the volume narrated, these theoretical concepts also existed in stand-alone methodological chapters. In addition to the section on the “the deployment of sexuality” which provides a fully developed and “polyvalent” account of Foucault’s understanding of discourse and its relationship to the workings of cultural power, the concluding essay in the volume also represents Foucault’s first published account of biopower and biopolitics. When Foucault expands what was initially a Preface to the project into the volumes that became *History of Sexuality Volumes Two and Three* it was with a new historical focus and a new theoretical framework. In opposition to *Volume One*’s focus on the modern period, the next three volumes would address the conception of sexuality and its intertwining with ethics and the construction of the self from ancient Greece (*Volume Two*) and classical Rome (*Volume Three*) to early Christian writings (*Volume Four*). Central to this approach was an attempt to think outside of and provide a genealogy of the psychoanalytic and Christian frameworks (and part of Foucault’s implicit polemic is to suggest the one grows out of the other) that defined sexuality in relationship to a conception of the desiring subject. Foucault articulates this changed approach in *Volume Two*:

But when I came to study the modes according to which individuals are given to recognize themselves as sexual subjects the problems were much greater. At the time, the notion of desire, or of the desiring subject constituted if not a theory, then at least a generally accepted theoretical theme. This very acceptance was odd: it was this same theme, in fact, or variations thereof, that was found not only at the very center of the traditional theory, but also in the conceptions that sought to detach themselves from it. It was this theme, too, that appeared to have been inherited, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from a long Christian tradition. While the experience of sexuality, as a singular historical figure, is perhaps quite distinct from the Christian experience of the “flesh,” both appear nonetheless to be dominated by the principle of “desiring man.” In any case, it seemed to me that one could not very well analyze the formation and development of the experience of sexuality from the eighteenth century onwards, without doing a historical and critical study dealing with desire and the desiring subject. In other words, without undertaking a “genealogy.” (HoSV2, 5).

It is precisely this genealogy that Foucault undertakes in the last three volumes of the *History of Sexuality*. And while the concept of the desiring subject is the focus,

Foucault wants to historicize this figure, demonstrating that it is the specific product of a distinctive organization of power, discourse, institutions, and a specific conception of the self. In contrast to a concept of "sexuality as conceived as a constant," his genealogical methodology wants to unearth the concept of selfhood and sexuality that precedes this specific conception of the desiring subject that he attributes to both the Christian church and, implicitly, to psychoanalytic dogma (4).

With the recent posthumous release of the *History of Sexuality Volume Four*, we are now in a particularly advantageous position to reassess the work done by Foucault's shift in approach and the genealogy around which it is based. In reading volumes Two through Four in relationship to each other, a number of striking things emerge that complicate, while also rearticulating his account of the productive and repressive hypotheses in *Volume One*. Rather than the idea of sex as repressed being a twentieth-century misunderstanding of the Victorian obsession with sexual impropriety and impurity (as Foucault argues in *Volume One*), a negative conception of sex as fleshly and shameful is precisely what emerges from the Christian codification institutionalization of sexual morality in the fourth century CE. What becomes apparent from a careful reading of *Volume Four* is that Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis, in this volume at least, is much more local and less sweeping than it is often claimed. It is really against the notion that sex was repressed from discourse and that the negative moral valence given to it produced a culture of silence and willful ignorance. Foucault is certainly right that the opposite is true; the Victorians talked about sex endlessly. What is less clear is whether sex functioned as a site of repressive control and intervention. It is this last idea that seems to correspond to his account of the way in which local ethical injunctions and prescriptions about sex in ancient texts morphed into a codification of explicit rules and forms of governance around sexuality in the early Church. Repression, within such a framework, is not a misguided historiographical concept, so much as an ideology, making it parallel to Marxist understandings of ideology, rather than a discourse in the typical Foucauldian sense. It is a representation that fundamentally delimits and misconstrues the reality of the version of sexuality Foucault appears to advocate (although what he advocates is always hard to pin down, given the ways in which it is folded into a historical narrative). It is not just the productivity of discourses of sexuality that does powerful work here, but the moral valence attached to such discourses. A concept of repression, not as silence but as castigation and as a tool of pastoral governance, takes its place alongside the productive hypothesis in *Volume Four*.

Central to this conception of repression is a notion of libido, which becomes the tool that Foucault uses to link early Church conceptions of the desiring subject to

later, implicitly psychoanalytic ones. This account of libido and its relationship to repression emerges most fully in Foucault's reading of Augustine in *Volume Four*:

Augustine gives us the name *libido* to that movement which traverses and sweeps along every sexual act, that makes them both visible and shameful, that ties them to spiritual death as to their cause, to physical death as their accompaniment—that movement, or more exactly, its involuntary form and force. Libido is what specifically marks the sexual acts of fallen man; or using the words of another vocabulary, *libido* is not an intrinsic aspect of the sexual act that would be tied to it analytically. It is an element which the transgression, the fall, and the principle of 'reciprocity of disobedience' tied to the act synthetically. (HOSV4, 266)

The rearticulation of libido as a concept is linked to an understanding of sex as shameful, a moral framework usually associated with concepts of church-based sexual repression. It is also associated with a conception of self that points toward a notion of a split subject, most famously articulated by Lacan, but central to most psychoanalysis that takes the most radical insights of Freud seriously.²⁰ In opposition to the spiritual and rational ("analytic" as Foucault puts it) dimensions of the Christian subject, libido forms the irrational and uncontrollable dimensions of man as fallen. Sex here is fundamentally split off from conscious, ethical direction. It is instead a site of otherness and sin.

Key to Foucault's argument is how he contrasts earlier Roman and especially Greek philosophical and practical accounts of sexuality with the pastoral doctrine emergent in Augustine and other writers of the early Church. While he is careful to resist the conventional opposition between the licentious Greeks and repressed Christians (with the Romans as kind of a vanishing mediator), noting that writing about sex for both groups involves producing a series of proscriptions and recommendations, the Greek vision of sexuality (what Foucault terms *aphrodisia*) is one that is formed around an ethics of the self in contrast to the singular governmental and biopolitical apparatus formed by the Church. His account emphasizes how his genealogy of morality, particularly in *Volume Two*, is organized around an ethical concept of self-governance and self-reflexivity, one that wasn't a social set of codified injunctions, but rather a set of flexible advisements. He states that he is interested in examining "the way in which individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct would be concerned with the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by

oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object" (HOS2, 29). He goes on to assert: "This last is what might be called a history of 'ethics' and 'ascetics,' understood as a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of self that are meant to ensure it" (HOS2, 29). What Foucault emphasizes, then, before the emergence of the pastoral governance of the church is a practice of self-shaping and self-reflection in which individuals construct a subjective or self-based relationship to sexuality, one that involves ethical control over and reflection on its uses.

Commenters on the later volumes of the *History of Sexuality* have often read this conception of a sexually based ethics organized around reflexive care for the self and its pleasures as a counter-practice of self-governance against the massive and universalizing regulation of sexuality presented by the Church. If we are right in deducing a kind of advocacy of the Greek approach to sexual morality, here, part of what appeals to Foucault seems to be the way in which the Greek's took a practical relationship to sexual ethics.²¹ It was a matter of individual conduct, reflection, and relationship to a code, one that contrasts with the massive biopolitical and unified moral apparatus produced by the church. As we saw above, this apparatus split off the flesh and desire (or libido) from the spiritual and rational. It is the force of this apparatus and the way in which it dominates Western conceptions of sexuality (and which Foucault sees as continuing into secular formations such as psychoanalysis) that, in all likelihood, spurred him into moving the second through fourth volumes of the series backwards in time. You cannot do an effective genealogy of a concept if you have nothing against which to contrast it.

Rethinking Foucault in the Present

Foucault's emphasis on the Greek conception of an ethics of the sexual self has a number of things to recommend it. He clearly was trying to imagine a conception of sexuality and ethics that was not freighted with a binarized morality and the privileging of the spiritual and rational over the fleshly and affective. Thus, at its best, we can read Foucault as proposing an alternate materialism around sexuality, one that is organized around the maintenance, use, and pleasures of the body. Certainly, any queer materialism in the present would want to emphasize as much.

Where Foucault's conception of an ethics of sexuality becomes more ambiguous is in terms of its advocacy of a localized and individualized set of practices. While Foucault describes his larger project as being about the attendance to the desiring subject, the desiring subject he seems to privilege is a relatively autonomous conception of the self, one who can finally direct and manage their own

sexuality. In this way, this notion of self echoes the neoliberal reworking of biopolitics around the concept of human capital *and homo oeconomicus* that he details in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (225-232). Central to neoliberal governance is the transfer of social responsibility for the welfare and care of those who are recognized as citizens from the collective formations of the nation-state to the individual. Thus, economic opportunity, bodily health, education, and what can finally be described as life chances are not the responsibility of the socialist or welfare state but rather are products and expressions of a given self's generation of human capital. The conception of sexuality that Foucault presents in the later volumes of the *History of Sexuality* is roughly parallel. Sexuality should be a matter of self-governance and self-maintenance (an ethics of the self) rather than something thoroughly social and political, linked to other political struggles around equality. While the appeal of this notion certainly is understandable as Foucault is writing at a moment after the important achievements of the gay liberation movement and as the specter of AIDS (a disease that will take Foucault from us much too soon) was just starting to haunt figurations of public sexuality. Given the forms of self-governance that took place in the various public spaces of gay liberation and the way in which a state-sponsored homophobic backlash was just beginning to get underway, Foucault's emphasis on self-governance is understandable and probably pragmatic.

However, in our own twenty-first-century moment of the algorithmic production of and competition among identities, the increasingly micrological understanding of such identities, and the molecularization of sexuality, such a decentralized and atomized understanding of the self seems to adhere to the dominant ideologies produced by forty more years of neoliberalism rather than challenge them. Our conception of sexual identities in the present emphasizes a moral shaping and maximizing of the self, which is conceptualized as unified, autonomous, and avatar-based. Within this current context, a decentralized conception of individual sexual ethics seems less radical. It is closer to libertarian business as usual. Instead, while Foucault is surely right to criticize the collective unification of sexual morality and meaning under the early Church, in our own moment, which combines structural inequality with an atomization of the social, we need a revitalized conception of what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner famously described as "sex in public," or what might also be described as a sexual commons, in which individual identities and microcommunities are enfolded into a collective vision of sexual possibility and world-making.²² Such was the initial promise of the concept of queer. Moreover, unlike many conceptions of the commons, such a concept would also need material and infrastructural support by an active state. Access to reproductive rights, access to transitioning technologies, rights to refuse

nonconsensual medical intervention (particularly for intersex subjects), rights to healthcare, safe sex practices, spaces of sexual-expression, affirmation of and economic support for various kinds of partnership, family arrangements, interventions into the long history of racial and class inequality, etc. would all be part of such an expansive vision. While I want to affirm the way in which the present has produced a new grammar around sexuality and gender, one in which sexuality itself is not assumed as universal and one in which gender is increasingly understood detached from bodily sex (which, as I and other scholars of intersex have argued, should also not be conceptualized as binary) and open to a vast array of different expressions, what I want to push against is the turning of these enlarged sexual possibilities into a scattered, reified and atomized set of individual, and noncontradictory identities. Sexual collectivity is crucial to theorize in our profoundly unequal present, one in which growing fascism, the rollback of reproductive rights, the growth of homophobic and transphobic legislation, economic precarity, a reenergized white supremacy, and the ongoing violence of the climate emergency demand collective action and a collective defense of the public good and of the commons, including the sexual commons. In arguing for such a vision, I take my lead less from the Foucault of the *History of Sexuality Volume Two*, with its investment in local sexual practices and autonomy, and more from the Foucault of *Volume One*, who is critical of the way in which identities become tied to notions of truth, ones that limit other social arrangements, institutions, and possibilities.

Conclusion: Rethinking the Repressive and Productive Hypotheses

So, now that we have situated Foucault's account of productive power, the different forms of sexual ethics he advocates, and the changing vision of sexuality that is central to the four volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, where does that leave us in relationship to the opposition with which we started? How does a reconsideration of such an opposition situate us in relationship to the concepts of the subject and the self that are also central to Foucault's argument (and my own)?

As powerful as an intervention as the critique of the repressive hypothesis is, our understanding of it threatens to create an unproductive binary between what are often seen as two radically distinct modes of power. Careful consideration of the two forms of power demonstrates that they overlap and support each other much more than is often presumed. As I argued above, Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis is directed at the equation of repression with silence. He is challenging the idea that the Victorian attitude toward sex was organized around a willful silence, instead demonstrating that the Victorians were remarkably voluble on the subject.

Their accounts of sex may have primarily taken place in medical, juridical, and moral discourses that presented it as a problem, but the negative framing of sexuality did not limit the productivity of the discourse. This productivity is another crucial insight of Foucault's and is central to what I have been terming the productive hypothesis. Even negative or condemnatory discourses are productive of the thing that they repudiate. The workings of productive power are everywhere observable in modern society, and it is even more pronounced in the contemporary moment of social media and the algorithmic production of culture and knowledge. Bad press is still press, as everything from manufactured celebrity wars to the entirety of the Trump presidency demonstrates. To an account of power that only sees it as negating, Foucault's account of the positivity of power is a major advance. Indeed, while it is often opposed to Marxist accounts of power, it, like Marxism, demonstrates the limits of a politics of positive representation. Just because representation has shifted from negative to positive does not make it less saturated with power and implicitly constraining. As Whaneema Lubiano argues, it makes a given position or identity more easily appropriable by the liberal state.²³ Similarly, it also can function as a key site of ideology, given that positive representation works to cover over historical and contemporary inequalities and contradictions.

But of course, such an understanding of productive power starts to undo its opposition to repressive power. Central to a more developed understanding of repressive power is not the absolute negation of something, so much as the creations of structures of constraint, denigration, and contradiction. Repressive power relies on naming as much as productive power; the two can be understood as working in tandem to structure the social field (this of course was Althusser's point in his account of state apparatuses). For example, wage labor is not negated by capitalism, but rather produced by it and organized within a repressive structure. It is both solicited (in part and in relationship to unwaged forms of labor) and structured in inequality. Commodity fetishism does not eradicate the knowledge that labor takes place so much as render it structurally superfluous to the purchaser of the commodity. Its logic is organized around disavowal rather than absolute negation. The publication of Volume Four of *The History of Sexuality* demonstrates that Foucault, in his last writings, was moving toward just such an understanding of power as both productive and constraining. The formation of an exacting and increasingly condemnatory account of sex by the pastoral governance of the Church depended on a combination productive and repressive power. It both inscribed sex within an overarching juridical and moral framework as well as within each individual subject's conscience. Moreover, sex was marked as negative, as irreducibly tied to the flesh, earthy desires, and death.

What is perhaps most interesting in Foucault's account of this negative regime of discourse around sex is the way in which it seems to point to the creation of the psychoanalytic split subject. While Foucault may have intended the similarity between the confessional, pastoral subject and the psychoanalytic subject to be a critique of the religious roots and trappings of the latter (and it is crucial to remember that Foucault lived and wrote during a period where post-Freudian psychoanalysis regularly pathologized homosexuality—his hostility is understandable in such a context), it also suggests a powerful historicization of the emergence of the psychoanalytic subject central to twentieth century culture. And while he may want to challenge this subject in relationship to the utopian dimensions he detects in the Greek "morality and practice of the self," it is this aspect of Foucault's vision that has dovetailed with a neoliberal and atomized conception of queerness in the present, with its emphasis on microidentities and a fully conscious and non-contradictory conception of self.

I will leave to one side whether the psychoanalytic subject is a historical product of many centuries of Christian doctrine or a transhistorical dimension of subjectivity as such. However we conceive of it, it is a crucial way of understanding subjectivity in our contemporary moment. For central to the construction of the psychoanalytic subject is a fundamentally intimate relationship to otherness. Self and other are not stable categories in psychoanalysis. Instead, as Jacques Lacan and Jean Laplanche both argue (albeit in different ways and for different reasons), our unconscious, our relationship to desire, and our drives are fundamentally formed by the presence of otherness at the very heart of the subject.²⁴ The other is in an extimate relationship to the self. It is this relationship to otherness (which refuses to stabilize as either the otherness fully within or fully without) that makes the psychoanalytic subject fundamentally social. Our identities are formed in relationship to the social as such. They are also structured by contradictions that traverse the subject and the social. In our own moment of reified and proliferating micro-identities, it is this understanding of social and psychic contradiction that is missing. Within such a framework it is too easy to imagine that selfhood is just about personal affirmation and individual pleasure, rather than the contradictions that inevitably shape social possibility and constraint. Thus, while queer theory and popular queer formations have increasingly consigned psychoanalysis to the twentieth century, as a failed technology of the self, it forms a crucial way of understanding queer politics and the queer self as oriented to the social and the inevitably social dimensions of desire.

While I may seem to be arguing for a return of the repressed subject, what I am really arguing for is a fundamentally split (and thus fundamentally queer, even to

itself) subject. Critiques of psychoanalysis often see the approach as creating a surface/depth model of subjectivity, where the conscious surface is disrupted and determined by a deeper unconscious. But this topography is wrong. Not only is it rejected by Lacan, who instead, in his late writings, posits a topology in which his three registers of the structuration of the subject, the symbolic, imaginary, and real, are imagined as intertwined in a “Borromean knot,” and thus not understandable as separable domains, Freud himself, in “Repression,” imagines “repression proper” as functioning more horizontally than vertically, and shaped by “attraction” as much as “repulsion” (SE XIV, 148).²⁵ The unconscious in such model is not a submerged region of the mind, but an extimate encrustation that overdetermines our actions and subjectivity. And while the real in Lacan, as that which is determining by its very exclusion, may seem to be a product of repression (although Lacan in the early *Seminar Three* would link it to foreclosure rather than mere repression), it functions in a similar way to exclusions of concepts produced by the rarefaction of discourse that Foucault proposes in the “Discourse on Language.”²⁶ It is what is not said or experienced, yet still determining in its very absence.

So, when asked to make the choice between the productive and repressive hypothesis, we should say “both, please!” We need both models of power, and we need to understand them as complimentary rather than in fundamental opposition, particularly in our moment of ever-growing macrological social, ecological, and economic problems and ever shrinking conceptions of the self and the social.

Notes

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).

² On Foucault's relationship to the Iranian Revolution see Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³ For the most forceful criticism of Michel Foucault as an advocate of neoliberalism, see Daniel Zamora, “How Michel Foucault Got Neoliberalism so Wrong,” trans. Seth Ackerman, *Jacobin* 9/6/2019. Needless to say, I read Foucault as generally more critical of neoliberalism, particularly in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2008). <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/09/michel-foucault-neoliberalism-friedrich-hayek-milton-friedman-gary-becker-minoritarian-governments>.

⁴ See Jameson's discussion of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* in *The Political Unconscious*. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 114-16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989).

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977). In addition to *The Birth of Biopolitics* mentioned above, the other volumes of lectures

that address biopolitics are: Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003) and Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007).

⁶ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014) 70-139.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 139.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume Two of the History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990); Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume Three of The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1988); Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality Volume Four*, trans. Robert Hurley, ed. Frédéric Gros (New York: Pantheon, 2021).

⁹ Michel Foucault, "The Discourse on Language" in Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 215-237.

¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹² Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974); Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, Second Edition (Middletown Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985).

¹³ David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁴ Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" trans. Rodney Livingstone, in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 83-222.

¹⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 82-86.

¹⁷ Christopher Chitty, *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World System*, Ed. Matthew Fox (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁹ Jordy Rosenberg, "The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present," *Theory and Event* 17.2 (2014), muse.jhu.edu/article/546470.

²⁰ The split subject is central to Lacanian psychoanalysis. It's coming into being is captured most fully in the famous mirror stage essay. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 75-81.

²¹ Paul Allen Miller argues against the idea that Foucault saw a model for living in the notion of an ethics of the self. Miller gave me excellent and detailed feedback on an earlier draft of this essay, for which I am grateful, and while I recognize his greater learning and erudition on the topic of Foucault, especially as it relates to the ancient world, I want to maintain that the description of the self and of ethics remains ambiguous and dovetailed (perhaps unintentionally) with incipient neoliberal conceptions of the social. See Paul Allen Miller, *Foucault's Seminars on Antiquity: Learning to Speak the Truth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 120-122.

- ²² Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (1998), 547-566.
- ²³ Wahneema Lubiano, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others" in *The House that Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black American and Politics in America Today*, ed. Lubiano and Arnold Rampersad (New York: Vintage, 1998), 232-253.
- ²⁴ Lacan's account of desire as "the desire of the other" are too numerous to cite, but everywhere informs his teaching (even as the meaning of the concept of otherness changes over the three decades of his seminars). Perhaps the most developed expression of it, is Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 671-702. Jean Laplanche's conception of sexuality as an enigmatic signifier that comes from the unconscious of the (parental) other, is similarly central to most of his writings, but is perhaps best articulated in Jean Laplanche, "Seduction, Persecution, Revelation" in Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 166-196.
- ²⁵ For a remarkably clear articulation of Lacan's Borromean Knot, see Luke Thurston, "Ineluctable Nodalities: On the Borromean Knot" in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Danny Nobus (New York: Other Press, 1999), 139-163. Sigmund Freud, "Repression" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), XIV, 141-158.
- ²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses, 1955-1956: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993), 321.