
Review

Sexuality: The 1964 Clermont-Ferrand & 1969 Vincennes lectures

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The volume *Sexuality: The 1964 Clermont-Ferrand & 1969 Vincennes Lectures*, published on the heels of the much anticipated English translation of the fourth volume of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality: Confessions of the Flesh* (2021), provides a blueprint to the development of the *History of Sexuality*. The lectures present a vast and varied set of notes from Foucault's archival research into the political, economic, psychoanalytic, and scientific questions concerning sexuality. The reader can see how this notion, understood as a western discourse that brings together knowledge and power takes shape in Foucault's thinking. The text is remarkably fruitful for framing and historically situating contemporary conflicts concerning sex and gender in a history of sexuality that includes plants, other animals, and human beings.

As a result of their genre, these lectures lack Foucault's typical style, requiring the reader to fill in the gaps between a sometimes unconventional claim and the evidence provided via bullet point. While interesting for someone versed in Foucault's thought, this poses a challenge to readers less familiar with his work. To make up for this, the editors and translators provide carefully researched citations as well as thorough information on the history and circumstances in which the two lectures were given.

The lectures show how all-encompassing Foucault took his project on sexuality to be. One can see how his interest in sexuality developed through his previous conceptions of madness, medicalization, and institutionalization. The determination of sexuality is at the heart of pathology for Foucault. He argues that sexuality emerges as a form of the determination of what is abnormal or ill. As he puts it, sexuality 'thus makes it possible to pose the question of truth within a discourse of madness (and in a specific way, not brought in from outside)' (p. 214 [45/47]). Yet sexuality also holds an integral role in the foundation and maintenance of the institution of the family. This doubled, contradictory role, marks sexuality as both



an object of liberation and of control. Fundamentally, Foucault attempts to disentangle how sexuality creates and connects the individual to society, how it connects the mind to the body, and how it runs through ‘the social body’ by what effects it has on the social and the body.

The first set of lectures, delivered at the University of Clermont-Ferrand in 1964, traces the discourse of sexuality through a psychoanalytic lens. In so doing, they wrestles with the difficult question of how it is that sexuality came to serve a central role in regimes of knowledge acquisition or generation. Foucault argues that this is due to its nature at the intersection of the psychological and physiological—sexuality is both body and mind. At the same time, sexuality involves physical acts, biological fact, desire, behavior, and reproduction. In his understanding, sexuality is both individual in so far as it is an identification assigned to (or ascribed to) individuals and social because it is connected to sets of religious or legal regulations and prohibitions.

To investigate this, in the Clermont-Ferrand lectures, Foucault relies on psychoanalysis, because ‘as the discovery of sexuality at the heart of man’s normal and abnormal conduct, [psychoanalysis] is the key to all the modern human sciences’ (p. 31 [25]). Psychoanalysis is the key to all modern human sciences for the reason it later comes to be criticized by the likes of Eve Sedgwick (2003); it places sexuality at the nexus of understanding of what it is to be human. This prefigures Butler’s (2002) later argument that to be a person is to possess (or to be/become) a sexuality. Sexuality solves a problem posed by the dualisms at the heart of identity that persists in western thought: how is it that a mind is connected to a body and what does it mean that they are intertwined? In fact, finding sex at the junction that connects the body and mind also exposes the possibility that sex is of relevance to all material life.

Sexuality in western culture, Foucault argues, comes to be that thing about which we are intentionally ignorant, but which we use for the determination of individual pathology. Thus, scientific knowledge of sexuality influences spheres of knowledge as disparate as religious fact and plant biology. The ‘knowledge’ of plant and animal sexuality, serving as both proxy for normal human sexuality as well as evidence of the natural kinds of sex, sexualities, and reproduction, forms a key ideological function in our society.

The second lecture series, delivered at The University of Vincennes in 1969, focuses on the naturalization of sexuality as an object of scientific investigation. Foucault lectures on the origin of sexing plant life and its relationship to our understanding of sexual reproduction. He dovetails this with the conceptual origin of the discourse on human sexuality as ‘perversions.’ Despite the seemingly common features between the two sets of lectures, Foucault begins to develop a new method in the latter lectures. While he does not abandon psychoanalysis, it clearly has lost its ‘sovereign and ambiguous’ place in the social sciences (p. 16 [21]). It seems as though Foucault, after the experiences of 1968, is determined to



investigate sexuality as a relationship of power and knowledge through a more materialist account of acts on the body through varied disciplines.

In place of a psychoanalytic account of the development of the concept of sexuality through its negation, Foucault develops a broader, genealogical account of sexuality. He aims to consider the way that knowledge (*savoir*) of sexuality came to be distinct from a discourse of sexuality, sexuality as a field of liberation, and the science of sexuality. This set of lectures, unconstrained by the dedication to a psychoanalytic method, is more materialist, focusing on the intersections of sexuality with economy, politics, and culture in addition to within biology, psychology, and anthropology.

Particularly interesting is the connection that Foucault draws between the discourse of sexuality and the way in which the elements of it form a ‘functional system.’ This functional system is, he argues, the “‘primary ideological coding’ of an economic process’ (p. 175). In this way, Foucault details a preliminary theory that the discourse of sexuality is a set of social rules, imposed by a certain class for their own maintenance. The basic similarity to Christopher Chitty’s political economy of sodomy in *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World System* (2020) is striking, but unsurprising. This leads to a discussion of the role of marriage in legal forms as well as other socio-cultural formations/regulations of sexuality. On the whole, the methodology of the second set of lectures draws Foucault closer to the development of a political economy of the discourse of sexuality. Once an alternative materialist turn is established, Foucault returns to the considerations of the biological in sexuality.

Delivered in 1964 and 1969, the lectures touch upon hotly contested topics today. As political tensions rise throughout Europe and the anglophone world concerning the status of trans people, their existence, rights, and what their non-exclusion from society might look like, many are tempted to rely on shoddy analogies concerning plant or animal sexuality in order to create a regime of naturalized, binary, and unavoidable sexing of human beings. In many ways, Foucault’s arguments show the absurdity of the analogy, arguing as he does that the naturalist’s form of discourse produced ignorance about plant sexuality via ‘the theme of plant innocence and sinful animality ... Or again the theme that nature is order, adjustment, relative immobility and not movement, growth, spontaneity, and struggle for existence’ (p. 226 [NP/58]).

It is no surprise, then that the lectures end with a rumination on sexual utopia, particularly the role that utopia plays in theory and literature. Foucault ends with a series of critiques of utopian sexuality, specifically the arguments of Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich. He points out that they fall into a usual trap of arguing simply that sexuality must be liberated by virtue of its being ‘natural.’ The assumption that sexuality is not an artifact of western culture is the very mistake that Foucault will go on to spend much of his academic work trying to dispel.



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