



The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self

Michel Foucault , Robert Hurley (Translator)

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Michel Foucault takes us into the first two centuries of our own era, into the Golden Age of Rome, to reveal a subtle but decisive break from the classical Greek vision of sexual pleasure. He skillfully explores the whole corpus of moral reflection among philosophers (Plutarch, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca) and physicians of the era, and uncovers an increasing mistrust of pleasure and growing anxiety over sexual activity and its consequences.

The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self Details

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Bsquared says

Un ottimo excursus sul periodo romano. La cultura genera la sessualità, cioè conferisce spazio ad un'esogenza sociale e psicologica, e analizzare le modalità con cui si pone la sessualità classica ed i problemi che porta è senza dubbio illuminante.

Peccato non aver potuto leggere una genealogia della sessualità: fermarsi alle porte del medioevo è stato come annusare un piatto e non poterlo gustare.

Mark says

Someone said that this book is advocating pedophilia, and I think that that person misunderstood what Foucault wrote. Foucault was describing how the current cultural relationship that men hold with women appears, in his theory, to have its cultural root in the association men had with boys in Ancient Greece.

If anything, Foucault seems to be saying that the current stereotypical relationship between men and women is unequal. At least that's what I got from the book.

Jon Hoffman says

A direct continuation of volume 2. The final section brings the whole project into a bit more clear perspective on how these works connect to modern society, but that was a task he set aside in full for the unfinished fourth volume which he was working on when he died. Still, we can pick up some of the comments previewed throughout volumes 2 and 3 as well as some of his interviews and piece together an interesting ethico-political perspective of the self and its constitution.

Jacob Rabas says

This last volume in the three part series is quite different from the first two. Foucault writes very clearly and makes detailed references. This is perhaps because the complicated epistemological and methodological issues are already developed and discussed in the first two volumes and Foucault is freer to apply his framework. It reads more like a straightforward historical work rather than the more ground-breaking philosophy of Vol. 1 and 2. However, we can see certain unique aspects of Foucault's methodological apparatus at work in Vol. 3 that we see less of in Vol. 1 and 2. I think that the notion of discursive "rarefaction" (meaning "to thin, or reduce density") is more clearly displayed in Vol. 3 than anywhere else. In Vol. 2 discourse on sexuality is diverse in the number of potential relationships that a free man can legitimately partake in. The only regulative principle is that of moderation in quantity rather an attempt at prescribing proper kinds of sexual conduct (with one notable exception). Given the discursive silence on sexual relationships between free Greeks and slaves, servants, unmarried women, men, etc, one can assume that these were not considered worthy of much moral reflection and conduct that took place within them

relatively unregulated. This changes in the era that Foucault studies in Vol. 3.

The choice of Artemidorus' manual on the interpretation of dreams as the first chapter in Vol. 3 is puzzling as it seems tangential to the rest of the book. However, there is a method to his madness. Artemidorus' manual is the first example we have an objective and external reference point beyond human control that prescribes and regulates the propriety of sexual relationship and forms of sexual conduct. In other words, it is a precursor to a form of "positivity" with regard to sexuality that we see later in the text when conformity to nature becomes the standard by which sexual conduct is judged legitimate or not. This comes to a final point at the end of the book when the monogamous marriage between a man and a woman enters discourse as the ideal context for sexual activity and ultimately prevails over others in the West (further elaboration of this theme would have ensued had Foucault lived to write a 4th volume). In the middle of the book, Foucault describes how the development of medical perception influenced discourse on sexuality and elevated temporary abstinence as a healthy restriction on a potentially dangerous activity. Sexual behaviour is increasingly influenced by scientific knowledge and restricted according more objective and universal standards. This is the rarefaction of sexuality, the thinning of legitimate forms of sexuality that Vol. 3 is primarily discussing.

It is good to consider entire three volumes in context along with Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. The purpose of discourse for the ancient Greeks is to achieve self-mastery and code of conduct that would allow one to rule over others. In modernity, the institutions of power achieve such a fine-grained discipline of the subject that the active adoption of a moral code for self-mastery was no longer even necessary. Discursive rarefaction was sustained by the punishment of deviancy. This is why, in Vol. 1, the proliferation of discourses in certain sites (like psychoanalysis) during the Victorian Era became a key inflection point that held the potential for a less austere sexuality.

Mohammed Al-Garawi says

This book is not about sex and sexuality, it's rather concerned with the discourse about sex and sexuality between the 17th and 20th century. Foucault discusses discretion in the discourse about sexuality and other related aspects, from a psychological/sociological/political point of view.

He first explains The Repressive Theory which claims that the history of sexuality in the past couple of centuries was based on repression. Where sex was considered taboo in case it wasn't for reproduction purposes. And the only way to liberate ourselves from that repression is to be basically more open about our sexuality. To talk about sex and to enjoy it.

But Foucault disagrees with that claim and tackles the progress in sexual discourse in the past 300 years. How it developed from a topic that is discussed strictly between spouses, into part of confessions Christians made in the church, only to become a matter of public interest in the 18th century in schools, especially regarding children and gender separation. It is also worth mentioning that Foucault discusses how homosexuality ceased to be associated with acts, and became associated with the person's identity later in the 19th century.

It's interesting how Foucault regards prostitution and psychiatry as "safe" outlets for confessing "improper" sexual feelings, in the repressive theory.

I also like how he suggests that discourse on sexuality, a mere revolt against this repressive system, is a matter of political liberation rather than intellectual analysis.

The bottom line from this book for me is the following:

The notion of secrecy regarding sex (and any other subject that is dealt with with discretion) is itself part of the discourse on sex (or that subject). Meaning that our talking about something as if it were a secret, as something hidden, is what drives us to uncover it and learn about it.

Nuno Ribeiro says

Neste último volume, Foucault liga toda a história que escreveu até aqui à modernidade, à criação da sexualidade e sexologia - algo que tomamos como certo mas que também é cultural (os termos são muito recentes na história humana).

Surpreende-nos com uma inesperada ligação (feita numa longa e tortuosa transição). A discursificação do cristianismo, que foi tratando o sexo no confessionário através dos pecados rigorosamente catalogados, onde já as palavras pederastia e pederasta tinham sido herdadas dos gregos ganhando contornos malignos deu lugar às patologias da sexologia.

Antes ainda de Freud, a obsessão em descobrir parafilias e patologias sexuais deu-nos a fauna classificativa que ainda hoje usamos e muita que abandonámos visto que hoje seria considerada insultuosa ou cientificamente aberrante. Invertido era palavra usada quer por clérigos quer por sexólogos. Quando os psicanalistas começam a sentar as pessoas no divã é com a ideia de que os pacientes se devem libertar das ideias negativas, das leis que a o cristianismo criou, associando o sexo ao pecado, e com a culpa impedindo o prazer sexual de ser experimentado na sua plenitude. Era uma ideia utópica, que foi reinventado de muitas maneiras, de que libertando da culpa as pessoas, a sexualidade seria melhor. A ideia surpreendente, que Foucault traz é que o método da psicanálise foi precisamente o de criar discurso, apresentando esta discursificação específica alguma continuidade ou pelo menos pontos de contacto com o cristianismo. Foi, mais uma vez, fazer as pessoas confessar. Escutá-las, fazê-las dizer o que tinham feito, com quem. Ainda que não no sentido de se sentirem culpadas, mas no sentido oposto, de que as pessoas deixassem de se sentir-se culpadas.

Nunca mais a sexualidade no ocidente deixaria, até hoje, de ser vivida como um discurso de si.

Esta obra imensa de Foucault, estes três volumes, são uma obra de história do pensamento, como o autor avisa no início. Abre horizontes e dá imensa bibliografia para percebermos de onde vêm as limitações da nossa cultura - com isso também perceber pistas para nos superarmos. É um trabalho muito bem fundamentado, rigoroso e, felizmente, muito bem escrito. É um prazer ler Foucault.

Esta é a nossa história, a da cultura ocidental (à falta de melhor palavra). Fico com uma ideia de que houve outros percursos. A moral foi uma moral masculina, as relações de poder foram desiguais. O sexo foi sobretudo discurso. E acabámos por nos interessar sobretudo pela sua patologia. Quando nos interessámos finalmente pelo sexo, inventámos-lhe uma sexualidade e uma sexologia. O que Foucault chama de "scientia sexualis". Noutras culturas, como a indiana, a chinesa e a árabe (até há uns séculos atrás, a cultura árabe que produziu o Jardins Perfumados) inventou-se o que Foucault chamou de Ars Erotica. Nessas culturas, o importante não foi descobrir patologias, invertidos. Foi escrever manuais sobre como o sexo, vê-lo como uma forma de arte e, em alguns momentos, como uma forma de transcendência e algo de espiritual.

Para mim, um exemplo onde se nota a cristalização da nossa cultura de "sexualidade" e "discursificação" é na produção obsessiva de discurso sobre pontos erógenos. Que continua na discussão sobre, por exemplo, o

ponto G. Sobre se existe, não existe. Tudo isto, sempre, como discurso, "conversa", "tema", algo "académico", "conselhos". Ao ponto de discutir que pressão coloca falar-se sobre algo que assume contornos de mito, que novas expectativas coloca sobre a mulher, o casal, a "relação sexual", o "prazer", o "sexo". E entretanto dizendo a frase sacramental da sexualidade ocidental, o enorme paradoxo:

"O maior ponto erógeno é o cérebro".

A contrastar a esta imprecisão obsessiva do discurso da "scientia sexualis" ocidental, a ars erotica oriental tem uma imprecisão serena, que é notória por exemplo no kama sutra. As posições sexuais sugeridas em ilustrações antigas. A irrealidade que por vezes assumem, são uma delícia. Não interessa nenhuma noção de rigor anatómico. Estimulam a imaginação. Existe uma ideia de arte erótica, que serve como forma de estimular a libido. E é isso que se procura fazer, de forma prática e directa: estimular quem vai ter sexo. Numa analogia, se houvesse um conselho como, existe um ponto (chamemos-lhe o ponto da manga, já que por exemplo os genitais são por vezes comparados a frutos) que é bom estimular, não é dado como sexologia. Como um conselho médico, de anatomia. É dado como um conselho de um guru do prazer. E ao ser lido, já é lido com prazer. O próprio texto já se aproxima do erótico. A ideia de ficar ansioso por ler o kama sutra ou por receber conselhos para o prazer não faz sentido.

O Zizek diz que hoje ao contrário do que acontecia no tempo de Freud, os psicanalistas dizem aos seus pacientes que são livres de dizerem que não têm prazer. Que se não são felizes, que se não estão a ter prazer a toda a hora, isso é normal, e podem expressá-lo livremente. Porque existe uma pressão enorme para o gozo.

Tempos estranhos.

As traduções da Relógio d' Água são excelentes.

Asma Qannas says

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Ayleen Julio says

Con este tercer tomo, doy por terminado mi primer acercamiento a M. Foucault, caracterizado por altas y bajas en la lectura no por él, sino por la vida misma. Lamentando que este proyecto hubiese quedado trunco, he de decir que aunque no es mi favorito de la trilogía, es un libro fácil de leer y con una progresión temática que nos va poniendo a pensar conforme pasan las páginas, cuestión que suelo valorar mucho en la lectura teórica. Creo que por el momento no me queda más que decir porque recién empiezo a digerirlo. Sepan ustedes personar la austeridad de esta reseña.

ralowe says

a review of sex and marriage as self-making technologies in the west prior to the cartesian cogito. i've been thinking about this a lot in relation to audre lorde, but i can't isolate a text where she elaborates her idea of individual internal coherence. foucault situates a rich greco-roman tradition in the first two centuries of the west within a system of regulation and governance. this is all vitally instructive, but it wasn't entirely what i

Much like volume 2, this is a true history of sexuality and has little theory. Foucault, interestingly, doesn't focus as much on the concept of power in volumes 2 and 3 of his sexuality trilogy. Here we get the shifting focus in the first centuries of the common era to a care of the self in sexual ethics. An interesting read.

Noebonaerense90 says

Volve, Victor Hugo, que te perdonamos. Es un poco desesperanzador ver como la situación del mundo no ha cambiado a lo largo de los siglos. No, está no es una reseña de "Los Miserables"

Lawrence says

The third volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* charts the changes in discourse from the ancient Greece to imperial Rome. Again examining the three fields of the body, the wife, and boys, he observes a strengthening of principles of sexual austerity. In dietetics, the shift is characterized by broader "correlations between the sexual act and the body" (238) and greater apprehension regarding the ambivalence of its effects. In economics, the conjugal bond becomes dual and reciprocal, and is valorized as a universal good. Finally, in erotics, abstinence shifts away from being a way of emphasizing the spiritual nature of love, and "a sign of an imperfection that is specific to sexual activity" (238). In all three areas, "sexual activity is linked to evil by its form and effects, but in itself... is not an evil" (239), as it will eventually become.

Oliver Bateman says

After finishing the third volume of this series, I realized that my rating for volume 1 (four stars) was too low. By the end of this book, Foucault's method--much slower-paced and careful than in his previous works--has begun to make sense. Volume 2 wasn't bad, its points were interesting and arranged in a clever way, but it's volume 3--in which MF begins to make a series of subtle points about the changing nature of the conjugal relationship and the propriety of love for adolescent boys--where it all seems to come together. The sources used here range from some of Plutarch's lesser works to a book on dream interpretation by Artemidorus (Foucault's discussion of this intriguing text makes for an excellent first chapter, even if some of the conclusions he draws from it about the acceptability of various sex practices (such as mother-son incest) aren't sufficiently developed later in the book). The novelty of these sources sets this book apart from volume 2, which had been built around the "greatest hitmakers" of Greek science and philosophy (Hippocrates, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, etc.); however, given its frequent references to that earlier book, volume 3 shouldn't be read as a standalone text. The real pity here is that Foucault never finished volume 4, which probably would have stood among his greatest achievements. All of his references to the development of Christian thinking about sex (which this volume is careful to remind us is NOT merely the product of Stoic self-denial or earlier Greek attempts at mastery and moderation, but yet another stage in the history of this subject), which are foreshadowed throughout the series, thus remain unresolved.

By way of aside, this volume probably represents Foucault's clearest writing, as well his most useful "history" from the standpoint of actually learning about and remembering the material discussed therein.

María says

Este tercer volumen se ocupa de un tema antiguo y muy contemporáneo a la vez: la formación del individuo en la experiencia helenística y romana. Foucault reflexiona sobre el cuidado del cuerpo, las reglas del matrimonio, las relaciones con las mujeres y con los otros varones así como la representación del placer y sus usos. Así, para el autor, es en el refinamiento de las artes de vivir y de la inquietud de uno mismo donde se dibujan los preceptos de la reflexión moral médica y filosófica. Y aclara que no es la acentuación de las formas de prohibición lo que está en el origen de esta moral sexual, sino que es el desarrollo de un arte de la existencia que gravita en torno a la cuestión del “uno mismo”. De esta manera, un doble fenómeno caracteriza a esta ética de los placeres: al tiempo que se intensifica el interés por la práctica sexual y sus efectos sobre el organismo, parece cada vez más necesario controlarla.

Marie says

Before I start, I'd like to warn you that there's a NSFW link in this review: it's the one about Sappho.

Foucault analyzes the importance of self discipline when it comes to sexual relationships and marriage, the normalization of heterosexuality through marriage and the condemnation of homosexuality by greek and by some roman thinkers, argues that a lot of it, though it influenced Christianity is not quite at the same level of banning homosexuality and masturbation. He analyzes the medical and philosophical point views and quotes authors, but bases his views on a fundamentally incorrect reading of Church Fathers, to argue that married couples out not to get any kind of pleasure out of sexual acts, which is not what they meant at all. I wonder how interested would Foucault be in Theology of the Body, considering it didn't exist at his time, but probably not much. Or probably a lot... just to trash talk it because it's presented in a friendly way but it's "more repressive stuff from the Church".

I disagree with Foucault, and maybe because of an Augustinian-Renaissance approach, I believe a lot of the common sense of stoics and other virtuous pagan philosophers may have paved the way for Christianity. As a Catholic, of course I believe that Jesus' coming is the fulfilling of Revelation, but I think that, like Celts and Native Americans had mythologies which made it easier for them to accept the new religion, so happened with greeks and romans, so much of their thought had common points with Christians, that Christians learned to appreciate such things and used it in their favor, much like Celtic legends suffered.

Also, he seems disillusioned with the abandonment of the practice of pederasty, which makes it all more repulsive (it's not my job to judge homosexuality, but seriously? Old men chasing teens? No matter your views on homosexuality, that is a justification of pedophilia, so I'll pass). The interesting aspect of this book is that he recognizes that this self-discipline could be also applied in the education of a politician, and that is indeed useful.

It also helped me to understand stoics a bit better. So, as a closer, it's less preachy than the first volume, and less blatantly pro-male homosexuality than the second volume, but still kind of gross, because he gets on the justifications for homosexuality, and one of them is that "women wear makeup to hide their ugliness, so basically women are liars". I'm not new to this argument, and I know it's not like he invented it, he's after all, just quoting Greek pagan people. But, just because men didn't bother to understand women back then, it didn't meant that we were uninteresting, and liars while at that.

I have survived 17 years with no makeup. I see how it could be necessary for a woman who seeks to hide a disease of the skin, or the mark of an accident, be it scar from burning, scratching, etc. I still like wearing it, I have been doing it for 6 years now, and I don't think a woman could fool a man just because she has an

unnatural color in her hair for her age or genetics, extremely red lips, weirdly colored eyelids, prominent eyelashes and perfectly rosy cheeks, among with weirdly colored nails. It's just an emulation, and sometimes exaggeration of traits men like in women: youth and beauty. Basically, the greeks' argument was that women are shallow.

I don't see how Foucault is this "inclusive defensor of minorities, especially queers", if women are often looked with disdain and left out of his dissertations, the marginal allusions to lesbianism (though, I think I should say female same sex-attraction: lesbian is a political term and based loosely on opinions about Sappho), because greeks looked down on it, or at least Plato and a bunch of greek ancient doctors did, is inexcusable.

Sappho and all the myths surrounding her, would be interesting for a start, but I guess that by getting into radical feminist theory, I could get an idea of that. And radical feminists do hate his look on male homosexuality as much as I do, though for different reasons.

I agree with the idea that "hetero" and "homosexual" naming of human sexual and romantic relationships is unfortunate. For different reasons, rather than the fact that greeks did not make a distinction for it. The problem is that it allows people to tag others according to sexual "preference" or "orientation", and define them by such. I believe the use of expressions such as same-sex attraction is less aggressive. And even people who have opposite sex attraction can experience same-sex attraction. You don't get to define them by "orientations", but recognize the fact that they feel attracted (whether romantically or sexually, but those distinctions concern gender theorists more, I guess... though sexual attraction without a romantic attraction would be no less than a desire for prostitution in my opinion). You could also feel an attraction you don't want to feel, much like intrusive thoughts, so I'm also opposed to the terms "preference" and "orientation".

As always, I don't agree with Foucault, but it has been thought provoking. Not his best, though.

Charles Lehman says

Takes forever to get started, but a satisfying conclusion when he eventually gets there.
