

externally provided ideological materials at the site of particular discursive productions.¹⁹

Third I have shown how one philosophy — empiricism — has played an ideological role in classical physics. (And continues to do so: empiricist interpretations of both QT and SR are still put forward, and accepted, even if they do not enjoy the hegemony which they allegedly achieved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁰) In particular I argued, in a Sartrean vein, that empiricism be seen as a consequence of Heideggerian objectification: the production of objects under the scientific gaze. And that we see this as part of an ideological formation to conceal the domination of subjects within post-industrial societies by their alienation from the tools/products of their practices.

This last case provides an illustration of one way in which social factors may indeed penetrate the arena of the scientific although without being determinative. That is, as I indicated above, there is no necessity involved here: empiricism was not uniquely determined for that role by the social factors. Rather we have here one possible ideological formation among many which could have done the job equally well, and the question of identifying the historical 'accidents' (social or otherwise) which for so long favoured empiricism has still to be answered.

19. For example, see T. Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, London, Verso, 1982; or Jameson, *op. cit.*

20. For example, the hidden variables programme in QT.

Scheherazade's Children :

Critical Reflections on Michel Foucault's History of Sexuality Vol. I

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What follows is mainly a catalogue of criticisms. I found this book intensely irritating, which is not my usual reaction to Foucault's history. So let me start by listing those of Foucault's arguments that seem important and probably right:

1. Far from a growing silence, there was a growth of new 'discourses' (the term is discussed below) about sex, procreation, population, etc. in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. We could also add a set Foucault has conspicuously overlooked, the new discourses about gender (such as feminism and domestic science).
2. In the cultural field produced by these historical developments, there is an intimate link-up between power and the production of knowledge: it isn't true that truth goes simply together with freedom. The new talk was connected with new problems of social control and the re-ordering of society.
3. The 'power' involved wasn't just repressive. It was in large measure constitutive of new social relations. (Interestingly Foucault here is close to the position of Talcott Parsons in his debate with C. Wright Mills on power.) Indeed it may be seen to have been constitutive of a whole new regime (see especially the last chapter).

4. The family that is at the focus of much of this talk by the late nineteenth century is not unitary, and not simply repressive. Rather it is the site of contradictions between different orderings of society related to kinship and sexuality, and is an active producer of sexuality.

5. Sexuality is closely woven into the process of class formation (as Thompson also showed fifteen years before).

Now for the bad news.

A 'history of sexuality' should, in the first instance, be good history. Foucault has partly evaded this criterion by publishing a book that does not claim to represent the results of an historical study, but those which are, rather, what he thinks *might* be the results of research should he get around to doing it.

It's not only a matter of his not offering any evidence at all for some large and complex historical claims. At some points he does offer evidence, but then he massively over-generalizes its significance. He does this mainly by offering evidence that actually bears on changes of language and preoccupation among the intelligentsia, and then drawing conclusions about Western society, 'Western man', or an unspecified 'we'. This is a characteristic trick of right-wing writers, and I don't find it in the least impressive coming from a radical. Nor to read, after more than a hundred pages of generalities about changes in society and culture as a whole, that actually the masses escaped all this for most of the time (p. 121). This points, I think, to more profound weaknesses in Foucault's way of understanding society, which I'll come back to after another point about his history.

His account of the emergence of a new discursive order around the seventeenth century—like the Reichian model of a new regime of repression under capitalism, which is Foucault's *bête noir*—rests on a contrast with mediaeval society and culture which is almost never spelled out. But on at least one occasion he does talk of the 'unitary' discourse about sex in the Middle Ages (p. 33) concerned with the flesh and penance. And this seems to me not only wrong, but conspicuously wrong.

Who, thinking seriously about the mediaeval intelligentsia's treatment of sex, could fail to recognize the diversity of themes ranging from the ordered ontology of Aquinas to the disjointed passion of Abelard; the delicate magnificence of lyrics like *Dum Diane vitrea* and the gross galeaty of the wandering scholars'

drinking songs; the tragic celebration of passion and denial in Dante with Beatrice in *Vita Nuova*, or Paolo and Francesca in *Inferno*. If these are thought to be individual sports, we would still have to recognize as differentiated 'discourses' the work of the theologians, the court singers, the university students, and eventually the secular poets. And that's even without reckoning with the discourses about sex produced during the Renaissance— anatomical (cf. Leonardo), visual, satirical, as well as a radical re-thinking of the mediaeval moral discourse by the protestant theologians.

I cannot understand Foucault's blindness to all this. If it is taken into account it must quite seriously affect his belief in the very recent production of a domain of 'sexuality' by a recently-constructed network of powers and discourses. It all seems to have been around quite a lot longer. Indeed, some of the things he claims to be peculiar to modern society—techniques of regulating life processes (p. 142)—can be found in ancient Sumer and Egypt. But then that weakens his claim for the nullity of the concept of 'sex' as an order of reality prior to the modern discourse of sexuality.

With rather less certainty I'd also suggest that there is a major error in his account of the growth of a modern *scientia sexualis* from origins in the Catholic confessional (part 3, especially pp. 67-8). His Franco-centric view of the world distorts the picture badly here. After all, the new science was largely produced in areas (protestant England, protestant Germany) that had long abandoned Catholicism; and among an agnostic intelligentsia at that. The major figure in the new science who lived in an overwhelmingly Catholic country, Freud, was a Jew. The only point where Foucault even alludes to the problem is where he refers to 'a certain parallelism in the Catholic and Protestant modes of examination of conscience and pastoral direction'. This seems at best ignorant, at worst dishonest—precisely this point has been one of the main historical *differences* between Catholic and Protestant Christianity. It is an old, and cheap, jibe against psychoanalysis that it is a secular confessional. The process of analysis is very different; and the roots of psychoanalytic thought are more in the Enlightenment than in the church. But if this is recognized Foucault's picture of a grand continuity in modern confessional practices as techniques of power is badly shaken.

Foucault's discussion is almost entirely about men, and his reading is almost entirely of male writers. He, or his translator,

has no hesitation in writing about 'western man', his discussion of schools is about schoolboys, and so on. How can a radical writer in the mid-1970s do this? And it's not only that he tacitly excludes women from most of the discussion. He also refuses to confront, or even recognize, the issue of patriarchy.

It's worth seeing just how this happens — at two levels. One is his treatment of the configuration of an event. It is typical that the patriarchal aspects get short shrift. A case in point is his discussion of the Jouy case (pp. 31-2) where he presents an episode of the prostitution of little girls as an innocent rural romp (literally: 'these inconsequential bucolic pleasures...'; p. 31).

The other, and more general, is his recommendations for the methodology of the study of power (pp. 92-97). He lays heavy stress on the need for analysis of the particularity, the local configurations, of power and struggle. He stresses that the intelligibility of power is the intelligibility of an interconnecting field of tactics, not that of a single centre (p. 95). This is all very well as an argument against a rather old-fashioned monistic marxism. But it leaves him without any very intelligible way of explaining the existence of the classes whose existence his later argument does presuppose. (cf. pp 120, 124). He suggests, rather inscrutably, that all the interacting tactics do get connected with each other, and 'end by forming comprehensive systems' (p. 99). But what those systems are (ideologies? structures? strategies?), what their bases might be, how organized and how changed, is left unspoken. And the effect of this is that he is methodologically prohibited from forming a concept of patriarchy, or enquiring into the systematicity of men's power and women's subordination.

This isn't a narky deduction of mine. Foucault spells it out himself, quite plainly, as one of his rules of sexualogical method: 'We must not look for who has the power in the order of sexuality (men, adults, parents, doctors) and who is deprived of it (women, adolescents, children, patients)...' (p. 99). Why not? we might well ask. The effect of this, it seems to me, is to rule out of the discussion of sexuality the *main axis* of the power that bears on, structures and constitutes experience and action in this area. Once again I find this a weird position for Foucault to have taken, as any sort of a radical; though no doubt it isn't hard to find a motive for an intellectual who is a man to remain silent about men's power.

Finally — and linked to all these points — I have constant difficulties with Foucault's conception of 'discourse'. Discourse,

plainly, is speech (or writing, etc); and Foucault aptly poses the question of who is speaking. But he rarely considers the question of who is listening. He has no sense of the *audience*, let alone any serious social analysis of it. In other words discourse tends to get analysed as free-floating meaning, not as an aspect of definite social relations. (Interestingly the audience did become a major concern of another French theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, in the same period. And compare English studies, for example of the growth of a reading public in the nineteenth century.) This enables Foucault to ignore the question of who is influenced by the discourse, and how far, or at best relegate the issue to a very marginal place.

In turn this allows him to fudge the issue of the extent, nature, and sources of *resistance*. Of course he acknowledges resistance, abstractly, in his general discussion of power ('where there is power, there is resistance...'; pp. 95-96). But concretely, he repeatedly talks as if the powerful endlessly get away with it, and the masses are endlessly subjugated (for example 'The implantation of perversions', pp. 47-48). While he speaks abstractly of confrontations, strategies and tactics, his vivid actual examples are usually of successful impositions of control, in fact of overwhelming power. For example, the village half-wit confronting the mayor, police, judge, doctor and institution (pp. 31-2); or Professor Charcot and the hysterical patient in his total institution (pp. 55-6).

The four type-figures who emerge from the mounting preoccupation with sex in the nineteenth century are, in Foucault's account: the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Mal-thusian couple, the perverse adult (pp. 104-5). In other words they are *powerless* type-figures who have been successfully labelled, categorized and controlled. Foucault doesn't see the issues from the perspective of the rebel; either by naming sexual and social rebellion as such (even Szasz can see that about hysteria); or by naming the types of the *powerful*, for instance the censor, the patriarch, the medico-legal expert, as equally worthy of theorization.

This is connected with another difficulty in his approach to 'discourse', the muddiness of its connection with *practice*. So muddy is Foucault's usage, in fact, that he often writes of the discourse of sexuality as if it *were* the practice. Examples: a) 'there emerged a world of perversion', (p. 40), as if the conceptual setting — a part of the 'unnatural' (p. 39) had actually *created*

peripheral sexualities; b) the treatment of children's sexuality, throughout; and c) the assumption that nineteenth-century sexual science didn't know what it was talking about — that it had to invent an object (pp. 68-9).

Right at the end of the book he recognizes this objection — at least in the form conventional psychoanalysis might make it — and boldly evades it (pp. 150-7). The evasion is his claim that the objection is based on a mythological notion of sex as a unitary object, whereas sex is actually a concept produced by, and subordinate to, the discourses of sexuality. Well yes, we might say, but . . . this still doesn't address the substantive issue. There is a difference between what people *say* (or what is said about them), and what they *do*. Foucault's 'history of sexuality' is mainly a history of public talk about sexuality. There is another order of questions, another history, to be written. This is the history of actual sexual practice and the social relations it helped to constitute. Foucault not only tends to write the common people out of history, and write patriarchy out. He effectively defines as illegitimate the ground on which much of the best analysis by sexual liberation movements has been done: the pre-verbal, non-verbal or para-verbal domain of sexual social practice in everyday life.

Now a history of discourses is interesting enough; and who am I to object to Michel gaining some inconsequential academic pleasures this way? Yet I am bothered by it; I suppose because it seems to be influencing so many people. Here is a stab at the main reasons for my concern. First it provides a new and seductive rationalization for an old sin — intellectuals talking endlessly about intellectuals, and not taking ordinary people and their experience and daily life seriously. This is a strong temptation, and a singularly destructive one, for radical intellectuals in a period of reaction. Second it throws the baby out with the bathwater. In disposing of Reichian mythology about the sexual revolution (who takes Reich seriously any more anyway?), it obliterates the delicate but real significance of the erotic and imaginative in shaping and fuelling resistance, rebellion and cultural dissidence. Third it impoverishes our understanding of power. By relegating sex to the shadows thrown by the glittering discourse of sexuality, it obscures the operation of power in the pre-verbal domain of emotion and relation. This obscures the constitution of exploitation, oppression and resistance in everyday life. One might almost say that Foucault was superimposing a patriarchal grid for the understanding of power on a field that has begun to be mapped by feminism in very different terms.

I think we can go to Foucault for stimulating ideas about a rather restricted range of problems: notably, the cultural background to modern state intervention for the purpose of regulating and managing sexual life. But it would be most unwise to go to him for a general understanding of sexuality, or power, or the dynamics of social change.

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* For those who may have forgotten, Scheherazade was the new wife of the murderous Sultan; she managed to keep discourses indefinitely so that nothing actually ever happened . . .