

FOUCAULT, SEXUALITY, LIBERALISM: A COMMENTARY

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One interview too many? Michel Foucault can hardly be accused of stinting on the interviews he gave in what turned out to be the last decade of his life. Given the surfeit of information on this phase of his work, an almost wilful overexposure, is there anything new to be gleaned from the retrieval of this long-forgotten encounter between Michel Foucault and two young English researchers from Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies? On the face of it one might think not. Of the twenty-four conversations collected in *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1966-84)*, for example, two-thirds took place during, or after, 1976. True, Foucault had become an intellectual celebrity following the publication of *Les Mots et les choses* in 1966, joining Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes in what was then the French structuralist pantheon and ascending to a chair at the Collège de France four years later. But, despite his relatively recent prominence, it is striking how steeply the curve of publicity rises from the late seventies onwards as interlocutors crowded in upon him, seeking out his opinions and interrogating him about the detail and direction of his work. And within this flurry of questions and answers, it is the projected *Histoire de la sexualité* that occupies pride of place. If indeed the ruling dictum of Western individualism had long been 'To know who you are, know what your sexuality is about,' it is as though the individual who did more than anyone else to foreground the significance of this insidious injunction and to bring to a halt its stratagems and ruses was himself required 'to speak about it ... more and more ... through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail'.¹ Small wonder, then, that Foucault soon felt obliged to inform those who came to listen and learn that 'sex is boring' – yet not so boring that he ceased to work on and around it.²

But still the questions pursued him, producing 'that wearisome multitude of interviews', as Alasdair MacIntyre once dismissively described them.³ Even before the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* appeared Foucault was already beginning patiently to explain his views on the *dispositif* of sex and one can even find anticipations of this project as far back as the early sixties.⁴ Pressed to spell out the ongoing character of 'your work on sexuality' (12) Foucault responds, as always, with admirable clarity, particularly in his remarks about the first, already published, volume. For those discomfited by the eclipse of the old Victorian orthodoxy of silence and restraint by the image of 'a veritable discursive explosion', Foucault insists that his arguments against 'the repressive hypothesis' were in no way intended to expunge

1. Michel Foucault, 'The End of the Monarchy of Sex' (1977) in Sylvère Lotringer (ed), *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1966-84)*, J. Johnston (trans), New York, Semiotext(e), 1989, p138; and *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, R. Hurley (trans), London, Allen Lane, 1979, p18. The latter is now published under its original (French) title *The Will to Knowledge*.

2. 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress' (1983) in Paul Rabinow (ed), *The Foucault Reader*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986, p340.

3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*, Notre Dame IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1990, p53.

4. See for example 'Body/Power' (1975) in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon (ed and trans), Brighton, Harvester, 1980, pp55-62. The origins of the *Histoire de la Sexualité* are discussed in David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, London, Hutchinson, 1993, pp353-5.

5. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p17, hereafter cited parenthetically in text. Corresponding French quotations from *La Volonté de savoir*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1976 will be cited in italics.

6. Judith Butler, 'Sexual Inversions,' in Domna C. Stanton (ed) *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1992, p349.

7. See Arnold I. Davidson, 'Foucault, Psychoanalysis, and Pleasure' in Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (eds) *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, pp43-50.

repression from the historical record.⁵ Nevertheless, 'repression is not the principal mechanism regulating sexuality' (13): the growth and consolidation of sexual medicine in the late nineteenth century gave regulation a new vigour while at the same time opening up the terrain of sexuality to previously unknown forms of conflict. But then it should have been plain from the outset that *The History of Sexuality* contained two, somewhat different theses about the status of repression. According to the first, and less controversial, formulation, 'this discourse on modern sexual repression' (5) was only one among many ways of talking about sex, of coming to know the vital role it plays in our lives. Yet Foucault also argued, much more iconoclastically, that it is wrong to think of sex as 'a stubborn drive' (*'une poussée rétive'*) that has to be tamed, 'an exterior domain to which power is applied' (136, 103, 152). To the contrary, sexuality only emerges within and through the medium of social knowledge and is necessarily always already enmeshed in modes of regulation; there is no logical or temporal separation between origination and control. Judith Butler puts her finger on the key distinction when she observes that 'regulation is always generative, producing the object it claims merely to discover or to find in the social field in which it operates'.⁶ Does this mean that sexuality is purely an effect of discourse, nothing more than a function of words or statements? Again, Foucault is exceptionally lucid on this point, for he stresses that discursive practices should never be studied in isolation. Discourses operate 'within an ensemble of practices' in which the discursive and the non-discursive are inextricably intertwined: thus, 'the discursive practice of sexuality is allied to certain other practices such as confession, and the Christian government of souls' (17). Indeed, the emphasis on 'practices' has the important methodological consequence of making any hard and fast determination as to where discourse begins and ends somewhat redundant.

But while these answers provide welcome correctives to some of the more tenacious misconceptions associated with Foucault's *oeuvre*, they can hardly be said to shed fresh light on one of the most widely discussed of all twentieth-century thinkers. Even the distinction between 'desires as opposed to pleasures' (21), a discrimination designed to permit the evasion of any imposed or assigned sexual norm (and recently the subject of a characteristically nuanced exposition by Arnold Davidson), is more illuminatingly set out elsewhere in the Foucauldian canon.⁷ So the question of the interview's untimeliness returns unanswered: is there anything of value here?

In order to assess the full significance of Foucault's responses, it is first necessary to restore them to their place within a network of statements about sexuality and power, that is, to ascertain their precise chronological weight. By 1979 Foucault had become increasingly dissatisfied with the *histoire de la sexualité* as it had been prefigured in the initial study. Introducing a translation of that volume to a German readership in 1977, Foucault from the outset began to issue a series of qualifications: this was the first step in a project

that made no claim to completeness, whose subsequent volumes could only be identified provisionally but which would operate on a number of different and not entirely compatible levels. What Foucault now envisioned was not only a text that would be disparate and changeable (*'dispersé et changeant'*), but a long arduous work that would gradually undermine itself as it shakily edged forward, erasing its own preconceptions in answer to the reactions it provoked from its audience and replacing them with new, yet equally brittle, hypotheses – the *dispositif* reminiscent of nothing so much as a Jean Tinguely machine-sculpture that is programmed to self-destruct. *'Changeant'* carries overtones of capriciousness and unreliability and implies that Foucault may already have started to feel that, with the publication of volume one, *La Volonté de savoir*, too many critics were demanding that his papers be in order, accusing him of denying that sexuality had ever been repressed. Yet all he had wanted to do, he claimed, was to ask whether the system of prohibitions, bans, exclusions or concealments associated with sexuality did not belong to 'a more complex and more global strategy' than could be subsumed under the *telos* of repression. As this revision takes shape, however, one can hear the gears gradually shifting and see a subtly different *problématique* coming into view. The real problem, the one he had been tracking and which had in turn been shadowing *him* for over fifteen years, the problem addressed by almost all his books, Foucault now asserted, was precisely how it had come about in the West that discourses freighted with the 'value of truth' were inseparable from the 'various mechanisms and institutions of power'.⁸ Those coercive, yet curiously unexamined 'discourses of truth' to which he had referred at various points in the first volume – most notably in his discussion of the *scientia sexualis* – would ultimately assume a much greater and more far-reaching significance (97).

8. 'Sexualité et vérité' (1977) in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988, tome III 1976-1979*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1994, pp136-137.

And so, by the time he speaks to Frank Mort and Roy Peters in May 1979, Foucault is no longer prepared to countenance writing the five volumes announced on the back cover of *La Volonté de savoir*. Instead what he was drafting was a book on the Christian Catholic confessional, to be followed by a third dealing with hermaphroditism. This was a substantially different programme both from those he subsequently outlined and from the books that were eventually published. In discussion with Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow in April 1983 Foucault maintained that the next book in 'the series about sexuality' would be *L'Usage des plaisirs* and after that he would bring out *Les Aveux de la chair* (*The Confessions of the Flesh*), which would be concerned with 'Christian technologies of the self.' But then the work would begin to diverge from this path: *Le Souci de soi*, which would appear after *Les Aveux de la chair* was to be 'separate from the sex series' and was to initiate further work on the ethical life of the self.⁹

9. *The Foucault Reader*, op. cit., p342.

This was not to be. When *L'Usage des plaisirs* came out the following year it was prefaced by an introduction that reinstated and reoriented the 'history of sexuality' as a 'genealogy' of 'desire and the desiring subject' and relocated it within 'classical antiquity' and the early 'centuries of Christianity.' Sweeping

away any ambiguity as to the status of the work on ethical self-interrogation, *Le Souci de soi* had become the third volume of this revised history, with *Les Aveux de la chair* as its proposed sequel. Foucault corrected the proofs for *Le Souci de soi* some four months before his death on 25 June 1984. And practically as soon as volumes two and three were in the bookshops Foucault was again taking the opportunity to explain the eight year gap that had elapsed since volume one. These later interviews are a study in mixed motives. Once more Foucault speaks of the boredom induced by the prospect of having to write the promised volumes on '*la femme hystérique, l'enfant masturbateur, le couple malthusien*' and the rest (139) and he reiterates his conviction that to embark upon writing a book requires putting one's ideas at risk in order to pass beyond them. At the same time Foucault emphasised the continuities with his previous work. Whether he was writing about madness, sexuality or crime 'it's always the same problem: that is, the relations between the subject, the truth and the constitution of experience'.¹⁰ Yet however airy and over-generalised this formula might sound, it does echo the terms of one of Foucault's earlier replies to Mort and Peters when he argues that *La Volonté de savoir* is really about the twin 'domains we call sexuality – that is analyses and experiences' and the way in which the former have, 'to a certain extent, shaped the experience we have of our desires and sexual relations' (13).

10. 'An Aesthetics of Existence' (April 1984), in *Foucault Live*, op. cit., p310.

The key terms in the May 1979 interview are 'knowledge', 'power', and 'experience' and it is their combination that marks this as an unstable, transitional moment in the development of Foucault's thought. What then of 'truth', the major concept that Foucault attempted to read back into his earlier work in the final months of his life? In his replies to Mort and Peters this concept occurs in connection with the abandoned volume on the anomalous figure of the hermaphrodite, the individual whose anomalousness resides not in the indeterminacy of sex ('a mixture of two sexes'), but in the lack of correspondence between a 'true sex' and the 'apparent', outward signs of sex (15). Here 'truth' is a function of an absolute law of sexual difference and it is this 'law' and the knowledges which support it that provide the conditions of possibility for the modern 'homosexual.' Thus, in what Foucault portrays as the psychoanalytic elaboration of this non-correspondence, homosexuality is conceived as 'a case of the play of a libidinal relationship to one's sex, through the perturbing or disquieting presence of the other sex' (15), a 'relationship of self with self' that he later calls the 'play of truth' or, more simply 'truth games,' ('*jeux de vérité*') – hence the opening section of the chapter on the role of power within '*le dispositif de sexualité*' is entitled '*enjeu*' or 'stake(s)', as in a bet or in a battle, rendered rather neutrally as 'objective' in the tepid English translation.¹¹

11. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: the History of Sexuality Volume 2*, R. Hurley (trans), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987, p6.

Can the hypotheses of *La Volonté de savoir* really be so readily assimilated to the line of argument advanced in *L'Usage des plaisirs*, as Foucault claimed? Or is it anachronistic to retrospectively identify such a reflexive mode of subjectivity in the first volume? Early on in the Mort/Peters interview Foucault

was at pains to underline once again that the ‘mechanisms of regulation’ brought about by the new *dispositif* can also form the basis of a *coup de barre*, a sudden reversal in which the disvalued category becomes the source of ‘a principle of affirmation’; or, less dramatically, what is described in *La Volonté de savoir* as the ‘mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effective regroupings, furrowing (*sillonnant*) across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remoulding them’ – in short, everything that can be brought together under the ‘rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourses’ (96, 100, 127). Foucault’s choice example of an affirmative homosexuality is the writer André Gide. But, as Naomi Segal has so brilliantly shown, Gide’s scenarios of pleasure and excess are premised on a ‘fluidity of hydraulic desire’ that is so ‘mobile and transitory’, so astonishingly restless that the dazzling range of erotic manipulations which Gide conjures up constantly threaten to slip from the grasp of even the most attentive of contemporary theorists, Foucault included.¹² The complexities of *La volonté de savoir* may therefore be too simple – even a little rigid – to support a truly committed hermeneutics of the self. And what if Foucault’s “reverse” discourse’ could itself be reversed? The historian Fredric Silverstolpe has argued for example that, as a matter of historical priority, it was apologists for sexual minorities like Karl Heinrich Ulrichs whose vocabulary of same-sex love was misappropriated and medicalised in the 1870s and 1880s by those physicians and sexologists such as Westphal and Krafft-Ebing whom Foucault cites as the official originators of homosexuality as ‘a kind of interior androgyny’ which was then turned into the name of ‘a species’ (43).¹³ From the standpoint of Silverstolpe’s admittedly heroic narrative, Foucault writes history exactly the wrong way round, unduly limiting the scope of its causality – though the significance of Foucault’s insights into the links between the claims of sexology and what he calls the realm of ‘*bio-politique*’ remains unscathed (and is arguably strengthened).

Instructively, the figure of the hermaphrodite and the allusion to psychoanalysis both arose in response to a question about ‘gender’ as a ‘distinctly modern concept’ (14) – despite, or perhaps because of, the increasing tendency to regard anatomy as destiny in the modern period. Equally revealingly, Foucault conceded the importance of this query while simultaneously showing a reluctance to answer it head on. ‘Gender’ (or its equivalents) are not terms that appear in the Foucauldian lexicon: in common with classical and, more importantly, Lacanian psychoanalysis he speaks only of ‘sex’ or ‘sexuality.’ In one sense this omission and Foucault’s disinclination to speak of ‘gender’ are surprising. For if the concept of ‘gender’ refers to a domain of cultural constructions, then it might be argued that Foucault’s history is a history of nothing but ‘gender’; for a project which tends to absorb the entire biological substratum of human existence, the so-called ‘facts of life’, into discourse logically requires such a concept.¹⁴ Some followers of Foucault’s work have drawn precisely this inference. Maud W. Gleason in

12. Naomi Segal, *André Gide: Pederasty and Pedagogy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p177.

13. See John Fletcher, ‘The haunted closet: Henry James’s queer spectrality’, *Textual Practice*, Vol.14, 2000, pp54-5.

14. The term ‘gender studies’ has, not without justification, been regarded by French scholars as an American importation and, until fairly recently, was treated with suspicion. See Nicolas Weill, ‘Les “gender studies” contre l’histoire linéaire,’ *Le Monde des livres* (6/02/04), pVI.

an essay on the ‘semiotics of gender’ in the ancient Greek world has argued, for example, that the figure of the effeminate male *cinaedus* ‘was defined not in terms of the gender of his sex partners, but by his own gender deviance, his departure from the norms of “correct” masculine deportment’. In effect, the identification of the *cinaedus* rests upon the interpretation of a performance: he ‘was a “life-form” all to himself, and his condition was written all over him in signs that could be decoded by those practiced in the art’. As a category, says Gleason, somewhat tendentiously, the *cinaedus* ‘fits’ Foucault’s account of the nineteenth-century homosexual ‘remarkably well’, it follows what she takes to be the Foucauldian logic.¹⁵ There were even *cinaedi latentes*, those who were thought to hide their vices from the public gaze.

Where scholars like Gleason see themselves as completing Foucault’s own argument by re-inscribing it within the more consistent conceptual framework of gender theory, others have found this strain in Foucault’s thought to be deeply compromised. From this latter standpoint, however sophisticated Foucault’s fundamentally ‘culturalist perspective’ may be, its lacunae inevitably mean that it is irretrievably confused.¹⁶ Christopher Lane has identified the source of Foucault’s difficulty in a marked ‘ambivalence’ towards psychoanalysis (variously described as an ‘ambivalence ... concerning links between unreason and the unconscious,’ an ‘ambivalence about the concept of repression’, and an ‘ambivalent relationship to Lacan’ mediated through Foucault’s on/off engagement with Freud).¹⁷ And one sees signs of this ambivalence in the Mort/Peters interview when Foucault characterises the psychoanalytic diagnosis of homosexuality as ‘always’ centred around ‘the play of a libidinal relationship to one’s sex, through the perturbing or disquieting presence of the other sex’, only to *reduce* it in short order to the prejudices of ‘current public opinion: namely that homosexuals are people who are okay among themselves, but it is supposed that they get on badly with the opposite sex’ (15). This condemnation jars with the treatment of psychoanalysis in *La volonté de savoir* where, as Lane shows, Foucault commended Freud for having broken with the prevailing high Victorian concepts of perversion, heredity, and degeneration – a point lost in mistranslation in the English edition – and also praised psychoanalysis for having recognised very early on ‘that sex is not “repressed”’ (81). But Foucault’s views on psychoanalysis seem to have fluctuated considerably throughout his life and despite his interest in and admiration for Lacan’s single-minded pursuit of a theory of the subject Foucault skirted around the more unsettling implications of Lacan’s teaching.¹⁸

Lane argues that Foucault never fully took on board the paradigm shift initiated by classical psychoanalysis, despite sometimes drawing upon its arguments and even ventriloquising likely psychoanalytic objections to his own position in *La volonté de savoir*. More specifically, Foucault failed directly to confront the question of ‘*psychical* history and resistance’ and as a result it is still unclear how closely he wished to tie the psychoanalytic concept of

15. Maud W. Gleason, ‘The Semiotics of Gender: Physiognomy and Self-Fashioning in the Second Century C.E.’ in David M. Halperin *et al* (eds) *Before Sexuality: the Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1990, p411.

16. See Christopher Lane, ‘The Experience of the Outside: Foucault and Psychoanalysis,’ in Jean-Paul Rabaté (ed) *Lacan in America*, New York, Other Press, 2000, p328.

17. *Ibid.*, pp318-9, 325 and also Christopher Lane, *The Burdens of Intimacy: Psychoanalysis and Victorian Masculinity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p5 (emphasis in the original).

18. ‘Lacan, le “libérateur” de la psychanalyse’ (1981) in Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1988: tome IV 1980-1988*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1994, pp204-5.

repression to the discredited repressive hypothesis and whether they stand or fall together.¹⁹ Lane points out that this confusion is not helped by Foucault's thoroughgoing conflation of the symbolic Law (the law that for Lacan produces desire) with 'juridico-discursive' law, subsuming the former under the latter and turning it into a delayed after-effect of monarchical models of power (82). In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that these two different usages are not wholly unrelated. Foucault could have drawn attention to those moments in Freud where allusions to sovereignty are at their most explicit, as in the comparison of 'the ego's position' to 'that of a constitutional monarch' in *The Ego and the Id*.²⁰ But he did not; and the form that a dialogue between Foucault and psychoanalysis might have taken must remain forever a matter of speculation. Now, as psychoanalytically-informed critics of Foucault like Tim Dean have noticed, there are some genuine if only partial points of convergence between Foucault and Lacan. Both writers effectively 'denaturalise' sex – to use Dean's very helpful formulation – in the sense that neither conceives desire as a force set over against language, and by the same token neither Foucault nor Lacan saw the intrication of the subject in language as a source of Cartesian lucidity or autonomy.²¹ Consequently for both writers 'liberation' was a peculiarly suspect notion. What divided Lacan and Foucault – at least in the eyes of Dean and Lane – was their difference in approach to the relationship between the subject and discourse. For these critics (reading Freud under the protocols provided by Lacan) psychoanalysis is always predicated upon a tension between that which falls under the sway of language and that which eludes it; that is to say, between the symbolic and the (unknowable, yet traumatic) real. When this distinction is suppressed or wholly absorbed into discourse, as they insist that it was in Foucault's work, any theory of sexuality will be merely culturalist at best and constructivist (or voluntarist) at worst, losing any sense of the radical discontinuities between sexuality and subjectivity. And those who would follow this path seriously risk falling into the oversocialised banalities of the more sociological brands of gender theory.

On those occasions where Foucault was openly hostile to psychoanalysis, as he evidently was in the Mort/Peters interview, he was certainly ill-attuned to the difficulties of psychic life, its suffering and its failures. Even Robert Stoller's rather sociological version of psychoanalysis – one of the primary sources of the modern sex/gender binary – was able to go further in this respect than Foucault did. At times, Stoller's work could sound very like Foucault's 1979 caricature of an 'anatomically and biologically genuine sex ... in some way masked or screened, perverted, deviated, spoiled, warped, by a psychological sex' (15), insofar as he often pitted core identities against subsequent desires and experiences – except that these conflicts were transposed into the register of gender. But in so doing Stoller also detailed cases of 'hermaphroditic gender consciousness' in which the 'law of absolute difference' (15) was subverted since in those instances reflexive play with and upon the lines of sexual division could be a definite source of pleasure

19. Lane, *The Burdens of Intimacy*, p18.

20. Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* [1923], New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1989, p57.

21. Tim Dean, 'Lacan and queer theory,' in Jean-Paul Rabaté (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p243.

22. Robert J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity*, London, Hogarth Press, 1968.

23. Lane, *The Burdens of Intimacy*, op. cit., p xvii.

24. Part of a question to Foucault from Alessandro Fontana in 'An Aesthetics of Existence' in *Foucault Live*, op. cit., p312.

as well as disturbance.²² Stoller was distinctly unsympathetic to what he regarded as Foucault's rarefied brand of cultural history, but his work would richly repay a Foucauldian analysis. For what Stoller's book *Sex and Gender* brings out is not so much psychoanalysis's ability to avoid the twin pitfalls of 'constructivist and essentialist theories of sexuality' – for Stoller was no Lacan – as the complex imbrication of categories and experience signalled not least by the constant strain between divergent modes of discourse (and, of course, the attempt by psychoanalysts like Jean Laplanche to critique the residual biologism in Freud would be one example of this abiding tension).²³ As Foucault's remarks to Mort and Peters indicate, it was his fear of the colonisation of experience by 'institutions, beliefs [and] discourses' (15) that lay behind his refusal to partition Being around a nature/culture axis and his unwillingness to valorise or counter-pose one side of the binary against the other. Rather than pigeonholing Foucault as a 'culturalist' or identifying him too hastily with 'gender theory', it would be more productive (not to say more in tune with Foucault's own epistemological skepticism) to regard the need for a genealogy of the sex/gender opposition, its structures and its effects, as an especially pressing task for any *post*-Foucauldian history of sexuality seeking to draw upon his legacy.

There are two areas in which Mort and Peters' questions reveal, yet unfortunately are unable to remedy, one of the most puzzling omissions from Foucault's interviews on the *History of Sexuality* project. Notwithstanding their references to the 'liberalization of strategies' regulating homosexuality (13) and their later attempt to link his work to Marxism, Foucault failed to take the opportunity to relate their queries to his then current work on governmentality. This is especially surprising since the themes of bio-power and state-led racism that were outlined in the fifth and final part of *La Volonté de savoir* formed the starting-point for much of Foucault's research in this period. One would never guess, for example, that Foucault was less than six months away from delivering the Tanner lectures on political rationality nor that he had just completed his annual Collège de France lecture series on 'The birth of bio-politics' in early April. Indeed, these 1979 lectures represent what we now know to be Foucault's most sustained discussion of the state. Yet these immensely suggestive analyses are manifestly incomplete. As Foucault noted somewhat ruefully in the *résumé* of his course on bio-politics, the lectures never really moved beyond the introductory stage and concentrated in their entirety upon the way in which liberalism formed the field of political possibilities within which questions of state intervention into healthcare, population growth and public hygiene could be posed. Nevertheless, by picking up and beginning to rethink the ideas sketched out in Part Five of *La Volonté de savoir*, they did create the expectation in some quarters that 'through a reflection on liberalism, Foucault is going to give us a book on politics'.²⁴ Not for the first time, however, Foucault abruptly confounded supporters and critics alike by taking a very different tack. By the time he came to present his 1980 lectures he was deep into the

early Christian confessional.

Interestingly, in this same period members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies were increasingly turning to historically based investigations of law and politics both in response to the agendas set by a range of new popular struggles and forces (second wave feminism, gay rights, black and Asian anti-racism as well as new mobilisations on the Right) and in reaction against the theoreticist glare of Althusserian Marxism. In this context Foucault's work served as a resource, a supplement to Marxism, and also, if less frequently, as a target. A case in point is Stuart Hall's remarkable synoptic essay on the partial deregulation of moral conduct that followed the 1957 Wolfenden Report which drew upon Foucault's account of the micro-physics of power while at the same time seeking to integrate these insights into a Gramscian analysis of the state and its strategies. Nor was Hall alone in this endeavour. In his last major book *L'État, le pouvoir, le socialisme* (1978) the once solidly Althusserian political theorist Nicos Poulantzas had attempted a similar synthesis along rather different lines.²⁵ Hence the pertinence, not to say topicality, of Mort and Peters' question to Foucault on the relevance of his account of power to the Gramscian concept of hegemony, a question that Foucault, conceivably with Poulantzas's recent book in mind, quickly brushes aside.

Foucault's ambivalence towards Marx – he was much firmer in his hostility to orthodox Marxism – parallels his mixed messages on Freud and psychoanalysis. He could in some circumstances be extremely lavish in his praise for Marx. In a 1975 interview translated as 'Prison Talk' he stated flatly that it was 'impossible at the present time to write history without using a whole range of concepts directly or indirectly linked to Marx's thought' and even suggested that historiography had become virtually identical with Marxism, whether historians recognised this or not.²⁶ But times change. In 1978, in a series of conversations with the Italian Marxist journalist Duccio Trombadori that prompted a variety of personal and methodological reflections in response to questions raised by several variant Marxisms for his own thought, Foucault's views were often diametrically opposed to those he had expressed earlier. 'No matter how important the value of economic analyses may be', he now opined, 'it seems to me a naïveté typical of those who aren't historians by profession to assert that an analysis based on changes of economic structure is in itself of explanatory value'. And at another point (in a discussion of the Frankfurt school) Foucault distinguished his own approach from a Marxist ontology by arguing that the point of intellectual and political work was not to liberate *species being* from the distortions visited upon it by capitalist social relations – a notion that he associated with an oddly essentializing, even repressive, concept of truth analogous to the truth games associated with sexuality's *dispositif*. Rather, his aim was to help bring into existence a wholly different kind of subject, 'something radically Other'.²⁷

The complete French text of Foucault's lectures on liberalism has only just become available, promising to shed considerable light on how he

25. Hall's paper 'Reformism and the Legislation of Consent' was originally given at the 1977 National Deviancy Conference and was subsequently published in the proceedings in *Permissiveness and Control: the fate of the sixties legislation*, London, Macmillan, 1980. Poulantzas's book was translated as *State, Power, Socialism*, London, New Left Books, 1978.

26. 'Prison Talk' in *Power/Knowledge*, op. cit., p53.

27. Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1991, pp121, 126-7.

28. Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France 1978-1979*, Paris, Seuil/Gallimard, October 2004. Unfortunately these lectures appeared too late to be incorporated into this essay. For a useful overview, see Thomas Lemke, "'The birth of biopolitics': Michel Foucault's lecture at the Collège de France on neo-liberal governmentality," *Economy and Society*, Vol.30, 2001, pp190-207.

29. Michel Foucault, 'La phobie d'état,' *Liberation* 30 June/1 July 1984, p21 (taken from a lecture at the Collège de France on 31 January 1979).

30. *State, Power, Socialism*, op. cit., pp27, 136 (emphasis in the original).

31. Michel Foucault, 'Michel Foucault et la question du libéralisme,' *Le Monde* (7/04/1999), Horizons-Documents, p18 (taken from Foucault's lecture on 24 January 1979). My thanks to Radosveta Getova for providing me with a working translation of this lecture which I have occasionally modified in the quotations below.

thought about the question of state power in this late period.²⁸ Very little of this material has previously been published, but extracts from transcripts of two early lectures in this series provide a preliminary indication of the direction Foucault's work was starting to take and how it was transforming itself. The critique of Marxism continues unabated. It would, Foucault argued, be entirely misguided to think of the state as possessing some hidden inner logic that needs to be unearthed, on a par with the secret of the commodity revealed by Marx. In line with his consistently nominalist approach to social phenomena, Foucault was at pains to stress that the state exists in its manifold surfaces as a set of highly contingent relations: it has no essence and it cannot be considered a universal.²⁹ Poulantzas had perhaps wanted to meet Foucault half way when he referred to 'the fissiparous *unity of state power*'. But, given that in *L'État, le pouvoir, le socialisme* the state was conceived as 'the factor which concentrates, condenses, materialises and incarnates political-ideological relations in a form specific to the given mode of production', what Poulantzas called '*apparatus unity*' would necessarily be overdetermined by class struggle.³⁰ Far from attempting to preserve any matrix role for economic forces, Foucault not only challenged these Marxist assumptions by denying that there is any tendency towards unity in the state apparatus, but also argued that the crises in governmentality since the eighteenth century (and especially those centred around liberalism) cannot be seen as an effect of capitalist development.

Foucault's opening discussion of liberalism in his lecture of 24 January 1979 is impressive in its steadfast focus upon political practices, its refusal to be beguiled by liberal political philosophy or political theory. Foucault both took liberalism literally and disassociated himself from liberalism's chosen self-image. Unlike such writers as F.A. Hayek who had traced the classical liberal concern with life, liberty and property as far back as the ancient Greeks, Foucault was profoundly sceptical of the idea that liberty is an eternal flame that burns more or less brightly under specific local conditions. For Foucault, liberalism was simply the product of 'an actual relationship between governors and governed', with the accent upon the positivity, the active powers embodied in that relationship.³¹ Liberalism is not a set of safeguards, checks or balances. It involves no movement of principled or pragmatic withdrawal from an already established civic order and it is therefore not the preservation of negative liberty, that freedom from hindrance, undue interference or unnecessary regulation that has often been the touchstone of liberal political philosophy. Consequently, liberalism is not rooted in some view of individual agency or motivation, according to which 'liberty is a ready-made zone that we should respect', the source of all that is vital and dynamic in society, to be tampered with only at our peril. On the contrary, says Foucault, liberalism is concerned to bring liberty into existence, not merely to stimulate it but to *create* it, to mandate it, even where it might be unwelcome or feared. Liberty is, in a very real sense, the object – that is, the raw material and the end-product

– of a new ‘art of government.’

As elsewhere in Foucault’s histories of the present, this account is predicated upon a rupture that displaces the classical era and, from the eighteenth century onwards, initiates the modern, but here it is liberalism that supplies the principle of discontinuity. What was new was not just a preoccupation with questions of freedom: freedom to buy and sell, freedom to own and dispose of property, freedom of speech and the like. Where the subject had once been knitted into a complex web of feudal duties, obligations and protection, liberalism did not merely unpick these closely woven threads in the name of liberty. Its formula was far more measured and far more devastating. In effect, liberal governmentality promises: *‘I shall produce for you that which allows you to be free. I shall do it in such a way that you are free to be free.’* Liberty thus entails a form of life in which the state perpetually engages in determining the limits and the hazards of free action. In contrast to feudal or absolutist systems of power:

It is no longer that sort of external protection of the individual himself that has to be guaranteed. Liberalism is bound into a mechanism that requires it to arbitrate every minute between the liberty and the security of individuals around this notion of danger. Basically, if, on the one hand, liberalism is an art of government which manipulates interests from start to finish, on the other hand – and this is where the reverse side of the coin appears – it cannot manipulate interests without, at the same time, *managing* the dangers and the mechanisms of security/liberty, of the interplay (*jeu*) between security/liberty which must ensure that individuals or the community will be exposed to danger as little as possible (*my emphasis*).

Above all, then, liberalism implies a ‘culture of danger’ or of risk, at least insofar as ‘individuals are constantly put into a situation of danger or, rather, they are conditioned to experience their situation, their life, their present, their future, and so forth, as being carriers of danger (*porteurs de danger*).’ The second qualification is crucial, for in this reformulation Foucault is arguing that liberalism elicits and encourages a shift in the mental horizons of danger from within the informational infrastructure of modernity. His examples are extremely diverse: the nineteenth-century journalistic focus on crime; campaigns around moral purity, hygiene and sexual diseases; eugenicist panics raised by the twin spectres of racial or cultural degeneration; public schemes to set up savings banks and insurance plans. Liberalism’s success depends upon the minutiae of everyday life being suffused by this climate of fear. In Foucault’s revealing aphorism: *‘Pas de libéralisme sans culture du danger’*. No liberalism without a culture of danger.

Predictably, this spiralling, all-pervasive ‘cultural politics of danger’ fuels a desire for administrative solutions. And here one starts to see how deeply ingrained is the grammar of Foucault’s thought. For his analysis of liberalism is suddenly presented as an alternative explanation for the dissemination of disciplinary techniques outlined in *Discipline and Punish* (1975; English trans

1978) with their strict hierarchies, ‘normalising judgments’ and constant scrutiny of individual cases – techniques which also exhibit the same links between classification and power that are detailed in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Where freedom is concerned, elaborate apparatuses of control can never be very far away, if only because freedom is precarious, its proper exercise presupposing an orderly well-behaved population. Liberty and surveillance go hand in hand, since state intervention is the obverse of self-regulation: ‘it is only when government, limited at first to its function of surveillance, sees that something does not happen as the general mechanics of behaviour, of exchanges, of economic life, etc. suggests it should, that [it then knows] it will have to intervene.’ Bentham’s Panopticon is not an aberration, a phantasmatic blueprint for total social control: it is ‘the very formula of a liberal government.’ The history of state intervention shows that liberties come to be defined and particularised through the intensification of techniques of control. Thus, the freedom to work, to consume, to exercise the rights of citizenship in the fullest sense are based upon interventions in market and extra-market relationships, including education and training, the supply of labour, commercial and employment law, and consumer protection.

None of these measures represents a one-way street and liberalism continues to be tempered by a suspicion of government, by a fear of its own excesses, a fear that impacts upon other styles of political rationality. Indeed, much of Foucault’s subsequent discussion focuses upon the ways in which the liberal project has been shaped by the negative examples of Keynesianism and state socialisms of the Right and the Left, which in turn can be read as responses to the shortcomings of classical liberalism. His two key examples of liberal state activism are the ‘social market liberalism’ associated with the new West German government between 1948-62 and American neo-liberalism. In each case the market serves (like economic liberty) as an ideal and as a yardstick, against which specific reforms can be tested or evaluated. But at the same time, in orienting themselves to market criteria, governments effectively confound any clear distinction between economics and politics. In the view of those German jurists and economists grouped around the journal *Ordo* who influenced social and economic policy in the post-war German Federal Republic, markets are not to be understood as autonomous, self-regulating entities with their own laws and regularities. Instead, they should be seen as complex institutions whose modes of operation will vary according to the legal and political framework that in large measure make them what they are. By contrast, the American neo-liberals of the Chicago School blur the distinction between economy and polity from the precisely opposite direction by seeking to generalise the enterprise-form throughout society. As Thomas Lemke has noted, from the Chicago School standpoint ‘government itself becomes a sort of enterprise whose task it is to universalise competition and invent market-shaped systems of action for individuals, groups and institutions’.³² As Foucault is at pains to point out, this kind of thinking is light years away from classical liberalism and its shadow-text,

32. Thomas Lemke, ‘The birth of biopolitics’, *op. cit.*, p197.

Marxist political economy, in which the hierarchical division between states and markets is reproduced in the base and superstructure model.

Foucault's 1979 lectures already seem to have moved a long way from the research programme initiated by *La Volonté de savoir*, making its disappearance more mysterious than ever. So why had the original project changed? As we have seen, this question occurs again and again in the interviews that Foucault gave after 1976. Yet, when placed against the wider background of Foucault's work in the late seventies, it becomes clear that the fate of the *histoire de la sexualité* obscures a more interesting and far less easily answered question: why did the investigation into bio-politics stall? Why did it founder on the reef of liberal politics, to be submerged beneath the waves of neo-liberalism? The following year, students in Foucault's 1979-1980 seminar presented papers on 'certain aspects of liberal thought in the nineteenth century', but Foucault's lectures 'On the Government of the Living' were taken up with the 'government of souls and consciences' in early Christianity.³³ When asked in an interview in 1983 whether, in the light of his continuing concern with, for example, the politics of mental health, he 'should be writing a genealogy of bio-power?', Foucault replied that he had 'no time' but that this remained a possibility – quickly adding: 'In fact, I have to do it'. There is a real uncertainty here: a disinclination to give up on a set of questions that had somehow remained crucial, but that he found himself unable to confront – despite the suggestion that they were no longer central to his ethical and intellectual concerns. Nevertheless, the encounter with liberalism had definitely left its mark. In trying to explain why he had turned to Greek sexual ethics, Foucault denied that their appeal lay in any inspirational alternative they might offer. Instead, what he wished to write was, he said, a 'genealogy of problems, of *problématiques*' rather than a 'history of solutions.' To identify a problem did not so much involve recognising and criticising what was 'bad' as addressing those things that were 'dangerous.' Echoing his own dictum about liberalism, Foucault put forward the following credo as the basis for his own 'hyper- and pessimistic activism': 'If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do'.³⁴ No radicalism, then, without an awareness of danger.

Like other interviewers from this period – understandably so – Mort and Peters asked the same questions that others had asked about where Foucault's work was going. But they also – as one would expect from members of the Birmingham Centre – pressed him repeatedly on political questions: on whether reform of the British laws on homosexuality 'implies new strategies of regulation' (13); on the relationship of his work to what for them was a still vibrant Marxist tradition; on the possible connection between 'a theory of discursive practices and forms of political struggle' (18); on 'sexual politics' and 'political development(s) ... in the field of sexuality' (19, 21). As someone who had recently devoted an entire lecture to answering the criticism that he had been trying to do without a theory of the state, Foucault sometimes seems a little impatient and often tries to reframe the terms of the questions.

33. Michel Foucault, 'On the Government of the Living' in Paul Rabinow (ed) *Ethics: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984 Vol.1*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1997, pp81-5.

34. 'On the Genealogy of Ethics,' *The Foucault Reader*, op. cit., pp343-4.

Two of his answers are particularly instructive, especially for the way in which they are phrased. In response to a question as to how his work might lead to ‘more effective forms of political intervention’ (19), Foucault argues that in seeking a knowledge of the contingency and fragility of specific social conditions his aim is to release social practices from any suggestion of deterministic closure: in short, his ‘goal is to render us free to effect possible transformations’ (19). This commitment is linked to a vision of intellectual work as assisting in opening up ‘a space which I believe is free’ and which, once properly understood, encourages the re-invention of an emancipatory politics. Moreover, such a politics will entail an adherence to at least a measure of truth as providing grounds for the removal of existing obstacles, prohibitions or sanctions. Indeed, ‘freedom, frankness and honesty’ (18) appear to be an indispensable part of the *ethics* of intellectual work.

Foucault’s critics have often charged him with an unwillingness to theorise freedom and truth, with misguidedly presenting his analyses in such a way as to leave such ideas out of the picture, even though his work logically required them. This is the burden of Charles Taylor’s much-cited 1984 essay ‘Foucault on freedom and truth’, for instance, which leans heavily on *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* in making its case.³⁵ But it is evident from Foucault’s answers to Mort and Peters that the late ’70s was a period in which his thinking on these issues had begun to change decisively. If, for Foucault, freedom and truth were not exactly what analytic philosophy had said they were, it was nevertheless becoming increasingly difficult for him to dismiss them as empty slogans. Through formulating the concept of bio-politics as part of his initial investigations into sex and sexuality, Foucault had been drawn into a study of the modern state that obliged him to confront the paradoxes of liberal reason – paradoxes that returned him to ‘the reciprocal basis of truth and liberty’ which he had once numbered among the ‘great problems of nineteenth-century philosophy’ so thoroughly overhauled by Nietzsche.³⁶ The lectures on ‘The birth of biopolitics’ show Foucault wholly immersed in specifying the conditions under which freedom was produced, or, more accurately, how different modes of action had been brought into existence under the name of freedom through a variety of liberal and neo-liberal projects. Freedom in this context is clearly problematic (as well as forming part of a history of *problématiques*): the degree to which freedom can be said to be synonymous with emancipation is heavily dependent upon the circumstances and conditions of power. Yet, despite Foucault’s attempt to fold his analysis of liberalism back into his own earlier analyses of the modern technologies of control, his account of freedom is not easily reduced to a function of disciplinary practices. Quite the reverse. Insofar as the need to theorize liberalism explicitly brings freedom and truth to the fore – not least through the possibility of identifying those points at which oppression and the productivity of power start to come apart – the practical notion of empowerment as domination’s obverse side acquires a new urgency. From this moment the more positive strategies or capacities

35. See Charles Taylor, ‘Foucault on freedom and truth,’ *Political Theory*, Vol. 12 (1984), pp152-83.

36. Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History (1971) in James D. Faubion (ed) *Aesthetics: The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984 Vol.2*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1998, p388.

articulated in the work on Greek sexual ethics or on the role of the *parrhesiastes* as the man who frankly and fearlessly speaks the truth start to become conceivable.

This is not to describe Foucault as a liberal in spite of himself, 'a citizen ... trying to achieve the same political consequences which a good humanitarian bourgeois liberal would wish to achieve', as Richard Rorty once memorably put it.³⁷ But it is to insist, with Foucault, that even the most self-conscious and self-critical genealogies continue to result in unexpected and disconcerting metamorphoses. *With* Foucault, but also necessarily *against* Foucault, since he can scarcely be counted an exception to those (grey) methodological protocols he had so patiently and meticulously laid down. For in pursuing the genealogy of sexuality into the coils of liberalism, Foucault, like all good genealogists, was finally forced to recognise 'other origins than those in which he prefers to see himself'.³⁸

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37. Richard Rorty, 'Foucault/Dewey/Nietzsche,' *Raritan*, Vol.IX (1990), p4.

38. Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' op. cit., pp369, 388.