

Foucault Recalled: Interview with Michel Foucault
Translated by Frank Mort and Roy Peter

Editor's Note: This is an interview conducted on 29 May 1979 by Frank Mort and Roy Peter, and published in *New Formations* 55, 2005, pp. 9-22. It was accompanied by reflections on the interview from Mort and Peter, which have been removed.

Mort and Peter: Firstly, could we turn to your work on sexuality. Is the overall project which you outline in *La Volonté de Savoir* still underway?

Foucault: Well, you see, I don't want to write those five or six books. Just now I am writing the second one about the Catholic Christian confessional, and also the third one on hermaphroditism.

Mort and Peter: How do you conceive of those subsequent volumes — particularly in relation to the question of historical analysis? One felt very much on reading the first volume that it contained a series of theoretical hypotheses on the nature and organisation of discursive sexuality, which would be constructed through more detailed historical work in the subsequent volumes — as in the manner perhaps of *Surveiller et Punir*. The question relates to the particular way in which you envisage the writing of a discursive history. Is the moment of empirical analysis highly important in your approach; and what place does it occupy in relation to your broader hypotheses and conclusions, which are pitched at a higher level of abstraction?

Foucault: The first book is not one of theory. It is a series of hypotheses, methods, or, if you like, rules of the game for a future analysis. In other words, in this book, I wished to point out that my object would be the historical study of the way in which both domains we call sexuality — that is analyses and experiences — have been formed. In other words, it is a history of a notion of sexuality, which is a fairly recent notion. There were earlier notions of sexuality, for example like that of concupiscence, and that of the flesh, but not of sexuality proper. Secondly, it is a history of other notions, other concepts which are related (*apparenté*) to this notion of sexuality, such as perversion, for example.

On the other hand, it is also the history of the way in which these notions themselves have intervened (*interféré*) in the experience of everyone, and, to a certain extent, shaped the experience we have of our desires and sexual relations. And it is in this way that it is a book of history. But it is not in any way concerned with sexual behaviours, nor is it a history of the prohibitive legislation of religion or morality. The analysis is a relationship of knowledge which is in the process of being developed, and of the experiential which is in the process of being transformed. From the moment I define this object it implies a certain number of rules of the game. That is to say, to study the way in which, not sexual behaviour is regulated, but the discourse of sexuality: the manner in which one has formed the consciousness of choice of sexuality. Thus, in the first volume I studied the Christian Catholic confession as ritual and code; an examination of oneself, and of the formulation of the consciousness which one has of one's own sexuality. It is because of this that the primary element in my analysis is discourse. Not because I believe that discourse exists on its own and floats around in the air. But it is in, or within, discourse that we see appear concretely the ways and forms in which one becomes conscious of one's sexuality, and the ways in which a certain grid is imposed on each person - a grid of analysis of one's own sexuality.

So the second rule of the game is that I don't admit, in any case I don't postulate, that it is repression which is the sole mechanism regulating the discursive practice of sexuality. I don't mean that there is no repression, but I think that there are many other mechanisms which come into play. In particular, when one sees how intensely the Christian west has concentrated on sexuality — when one sees with what profusion it is spoken about, what obligations it makes on each person to admit or confess his/her sexuality to his/her confessor or director of conscience, etc — one is led to postulate that repression is not the principal mechanism regulating sexuality.

Mort and Peter: Do you think, though, that the incitement to discourse in the domain of sexuality always necessarily implies new strategies of regulation? Take the case of male homosexuality and homosexual law reform. For example, the period of the 1950s and 1960s in Britain sees a proliferation of discourses around deviant sexuality — legal, religious, medical and psychiatric discourses — but also a simultaneous, and related, relaxation or liberalisation of strategies governing the regulation of homosexual practices. Such examples reveal a different and less uniform relation between the history of discourse around sexuality and strategies of regulation.

Foucault: My approach does not imply a strategy or control over sexuality which is increasingly strict. Discursive practices are the site of struggle. In this respect what happens at the end of the nineteenth century is significant. You have both a growth and a multiplication of books of medicine, psychology, psychiatry, of books of sexual perversion. And also, at the same time, or at least just afterwards, you have a proliferation, an appearance, of discourses in the first person on sexual perversion. The sort of thing like Gide, for example, who says 'I'm a homosexual'. That sort of mechanism appropriates in some way the discourse of psychology, even that of medicine, and gives it back. What is formed is a principle of affirmation against the mechanisms of regulation, which is related, in the first place, to these discourses.

One can observe another phenomenon of the same type, but slightly different in its form. For example, in the mystical literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries one can identify an intensification of techniques and methods for directing conscience, together with a gradual insistence on the dangers of concupiscence — a growing concern with the sins of the flesh, and with all the internal experiences within which sins of the flesh can become concretely embedded. In response to this, there is the emergence of certain mystics who are completely traversed by these sexual ecstasies — for example St Thérèse of Vila. This, in some sort of way, is a taking up and giving back, yet in the first person, and as an experience from within, of that which has been imposed as a rule of observance for oneself and as self-control by the directors of conscience. All this precipitates many of the characteristic epidemics of hysteria in the Catholic convents in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Mort and Peter: What seems a particularly significant development in *La Volonté de Savoir* is your analysis of the part played by anatomy, biology and population — centring on the body — in constructing and regulating modern forms of sexuality? From your remarks, one can, perhaps, begin to speculate that it is only in the modern period, that is the period post-seventeenth century, that biology and anatomy begin to occupy a privileged place in the organisation and construction of sexual difference, and sexual deviance. Do you think that 'gender', as we understand it, is a distinctly modern concept; that in earlier periods the organisation of sexuality across biological sexual difference did not occupy so central a place? In that context, you yourself have stressed the significant and changing position of the hermaphrodite, and attitudes to hermaphroditism, in your work on the history of the figure of Herculine Barbin.¹

Foucault: Yes, indeed, that is very important. I don't know how to answer you now in a way which would be both detailed and precise. If we take the case of hermaphroditism for the moment, it is interesting to note how, until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term refers to someone who has inside her/himself two sexes — rather like having two heads or four paws. It is seen as a mixture, it is monstrous and disturbing, but hermaphrodites are not considered condemned for their hermaphroditism, they are, quite simply, allowed to choose one sex, and to decide which one it would be before marriage. From then on the hermaphrodite had to remain as this particular sex; otherwise s/he would be condemned for sodomy. It is from the period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onwards that individuals begin to be conceptualised as having one particular sex. From then on, hermaphrodites are not considered as people in whom two sexes are juxtaposed, but rather, as people in whom their true sex is hidden by a superficial, or apparent, or seeming sex. Hermaphrodites are not now a mixture of two sexes, but are seen as individuals whose true sex is hidden by an apparent one.

One can see that the law of masculine and feminine becomes a law of absolute difference (*partage*), and that one cannot be both at the same time. Thus it is in this context that the homosexual appears at the end of the nineteenth century as someone in whom the anatomically and biologically genuine sex is in some way masked or screened, perverted, deviated, spoilt, warped, by a psychological sex, by a sex which does not correspond in any way to its anatomy. Certainly, one has only to look at psychoanalysis, where homosexuality is always defined through the identification with a sex which is not one's own. It is still a case of the play of a libidinal relationship to one's sex, through the perturbing or disquieting presence of the other sex. It is maintained that the impossibility of the homosexual having access to the other sex as object arises from the fact that the other sex is invested with a mode other than that of object. So really, that type of analysis does not take in any more than current public opinion: namely, that homosexuals are people who are OK among themselves, but it is supposed that they get on badly with the opposite sex. More generally, I think that all these elaborations of an apparently purely scientific order — effected, in fact, through a whole series of institutions, beliefs, discourses — have impregnated the experience that each person has of his/her sexuality.

¹ Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B. présenté par Michel Foucault*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978.

Mort and Peter: In *La Volonté de Savoir*, and in the proposed subsequent volumes, you do not appear to consider romance, and romantic love, as a determining influence in structuring modern sexuality. It would seem that romance has occupied a prominent position in determining the forms of appearance of heterosexual relations in the modern period. Moreover, its own particular history carries with it nuances and influences which reach back to the Catholic or medieval organisation of sexuality across the spirit/flesh divide.

Foucault: Yes, I quite agree. In fact in the romantic period, the problematics of sexuality in literature, as well as in both the natural sciences and in natural philosophy, have played a considerable role. I can't be more precise on that point, but it is certainly interesting.

Mort and Peter: Perhaps we could now turn to a discussion of discourse and discursive practices more generally, in the light of what you have already said. The question centrally concerns the relationship between the realm of discourse and the field of the non-discursive, and the implications that an examination of that relation may have for concrete empirical work which attempts to construct the history of particular discursive formations. What many of us have taken from your work is your general insistence on the specificity of particular discursive practices; the internal rules of their construction, the particular forms of power which are immanent to them, and the specific subject positions which are offered. The complexity of the organisation of the regulative disciplines is preserved, and many of the dangers characteristic of certain forms of Marxism, of reducing all forms of regulation to a single external principle or cause, are avoided.

However, though you retain a place for relations and practices which exist outside discourse, these are not fully elaborated in your work. The problem here is that a history of discursive practices could turn into the construction of a type of history from above. That is to say, the knowledges that are examined always tend to be the most dominant and the most formalised. Discursive practices are located within and deployed on a ground of non-discursive relations and practices which possess their own codes and rules of formation. Take, for example, the whole complex tissue of relations which constitute certain of the practices within popular culture. At certain points these extra-discursive relations may have pertinent effects on the development and the transformation of specific discursive practices — in providing resistance, for example. The field of the extra-discursive, as much as the inter-discursive, may be effective not only in determining the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a particular discursive practice, but also may be influential in the subsequent history of its development. It is a question, then, which centres on the 'purity' of the type of history that a discursive analysis may produce and its possible limitations.

Foucault: My problem lay in trying to bring together the areas of history, knowledge and desire. It seemed to me that Marxism, or at least a certain practice of Marxism, was founded on a philosophy of consciousness which was not satisfactory. The notion, for example, that received ideas and representations about the world are a reflection, or are destined to serve the interests, of a class. These two aspects seem, on the one hand, to be inadequate in shaping an understanding of fairly complex phenomena, such as the elaboration of a science, and, more generally, the development of those great domains of knowledge such as sexuality. On the other hand, it pre-supposes the human subject to be a constant entity which acts in accordance with the same mechanisms and structures across time; similarly, of wanting to satisfy its interests, or of having the same way of reflecting an image of the world. It seemed to me, to address the first part of your question, that the analysis of discourses was the first thing to be done. In other words, an analysis of that which is revealed — effectively the consciousness that people have about things. So this is the first point; to analyse discourses without relying on a universalist conception of consciousness.

Secondly, I always study these discursive practices in liaison with non-discursive practices, in the attempt to show how they are formed within an ensemble of practices which are non-discursive. In the case of madness, for example, I attempted to study the discursive practices involved in the context constituted by the practices of imprisonment, exclusion, exemption from employment, forced labour, etc. The same goes for discursive practices such as medicine, pathological anatomy, which were linked to a wide range of other practices concerning the mentally ill. Similarly, discourses around delinquency were related to penal practice. In the same way, the discursive practice of sexuality is allied to certain other practices such as confession and the Christian government of souls. That is the second point.

The final point is that these discursive practices are neither exclusively, nor necessarily, a way of merely prefiguring from above. As was stated earlier, these discursive practices are ever the site of confrontation and contestation. One could even say that it is always through discourse that rebellion begins. The English, American, French and Russian revolutions all had, as their points of departure, reversals in

mechanisms of discourse within discursive practices. To that extent, focusing on discursive practices is in no way a case of taking things at the level of static and intangible regulation.

Mort and Peter: A question which relates to your understanding of the operation of power; particularly as you discuss it in the latter part of *La Volonté de Savoir*. You insist that relations of power are not in a position of exteriority to economic relations, knowledge relations, sexual relations, but are immanent to them, and that they are not reducible to any mono-causal, single source. Yet you go on to specify what you term 'major dominations', which form general lines of force that traverse the local oppositions, and that link them together in a general strategy of power. This seems to raise a difficulty in your specification, and the problem is also present as far as one can understand in Donzelot's characterisation of the generalised strategies of intervention in the family in *La Police des Familles*.² Namely, what gives these non-localisable strategies the coherence which they are assumed to have? Are you referring generally here to the growth of a disciplinary and regulatory society over a broad historical period, differing qualitatively from older forms of regulation characterised by the rule of law, or are you attempting to specify something more particular: the fact that specific power relations which are immanent to particular discourses and institutions may be linked historically through a series of strategic correspondences?

Foucault: The first thing to observe is that, for me, when I use the word power, essentially, I am identifying a complex of problems. Power for me is not a substance, nor a fluid which may emanate from somewhere — from God or the Sovereign or from the popular will. By power I mean the ensemble of those phenomena by which men can have the possibility of acting upon the behaviour of others. And the relationship of power is precisely the interactions that comprise the relations of determination that exist between the behaviour of one person and the behaviour of another; the way in which the behaviour of one person determines that of another.

Having said that, it is quite clear that there are relations of power of quite different types and levels, which are always invested in practices which are at once economic, sexual, political, etc. As far as the phenomena of cohesion are concerned, which enable these relations of power to be organised into strategies, this coagulation, this coherence is perhaps due to different things. For example, the political and economic organisation of domination by the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries enabled this class to impose relatively coherent systems of power on society, systems which answered to the demands of certain objectives of the whole social organisation. The bourgeoisie practised a politics of population, for example, which took its support from a certain number of practices, sexual or moral. From another perspective, we can see that this class also restricted and prohibited certain other practices and attitudes. What we have here is an example of the relations of power being organised and becoming coherent through an economic and political determination.

But, one can have generalisations and cohesions which are produced out of quite different phenomena. Take what has just happened in Iran, for example, with regard to the relations of power which hitherto existed in the society between the religious mullahs and the civil population — men and women, parents and children. Those relations have now been mobilised in reverse in the struggle against the economic and political domination and power of the Shah and a small oligarchy. In this way, you see, the big strategic unifications can have origins, forms and objectives which are different.

Mort and Peter: That clarifies something. In the sense that there is a way in which certain tendencies in England are attempting to graft on your theory of discursive practices to provide a more complex form of Marxism. Particularly when you use the word hegemony, and hegemonic effects, in *La Volonté de Savoir*, some people turn to Gramsci in attempting to justify the use of your mode of analysis within a Marxist framework.

Foucault: I do not really want to bring up the question of Marxism. I never reply to the question: 'Are you a Marxist and committed to Marxism?' I carry out my work, and I utilise concepts and methods among which are some that are borrowed from existing theories. But, since Marxists claim that Marxism is scientific, it is up to them to say in the light of my work whether it is authentic or not. I don't wish to protect my work by a visa which would validate it as Marxist. I think that freedom, frankness and honesty consist in saying: this is what I have done. It's up to you to decide whether it is Marxist or not and whether or not that is relevant.

Mort and Peter: Finally, to raise the question of politics and more specifically, to how you understand the type of relationship that could be developed between a theory of discursive practices and forms of political

² Jacques Donzelot, *La Police des Familles*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1977.

struggle. In a text published in the journal *Esprit* in 1968, entitled 'Réponse à une question', you put forward several hypotheses for the definition of a progressive politics, among which included an insistence on the recognition of the historic conditions and specified rules of a given practice, together with a deconstruction of the notion of the effectivity of the 'subject in general' as the universal operator of all transformations. In what ways do you think that an understanding of the history and development of discursive practices, together with knowledge of their conditions of existence, can provide conditions for more effective forms of political intervention?

Foucault: Two things. Firstly, my historical analyses of discursive practices have neither the function nor the goal of demonstrating that we are imprisoned (*pris*) within history, with no means of escape. Far from it, the aim is to demonstrate how things which appear most evident are in fact fragile, and that they rest upon particular circumstances, and are often attributable to historical conjunctures which have absolutely nothing necessary or definitive about them. For example, one can demonstrate that madness is not a universal category. Supposedly, it had been misrecognised for a long time, and then suddenly could be recognised thanks to psychiatric science. However, one can demonstrate that psychiatric science forms part of a discursive practice, and that this discursive practice is part of other practices which are themselves integrated in a situation which is historical. In the same way, one can take the manner in which theorists of sexuality oppose male against female, classify perversion, and define the word and terms of sexuality. My task is to show how all of that is related to a historical conjuncture. Thus, these historical analyses do not in any way have the goal of imprisoning us within determinations. On the contrary, the goal is to render us free to effect possible transformations.

The second point is that I do not believe that the function of an intellectual is to prophesy, prescribe or lay down the law. In other words, it is not up to an intellectual to say: 'Rebel, go and make a revolution!' The intellectual work which I carry out consists in showing in some way how fragile those things are which we take as evidence. Consequently, my work, or if you like my activity as a militant, is to be part of a movement or a group which can operate from within this space — a space which I believe is free and from which we can liberate. The role of this movement is to invent forms of action, and actually to practice transformations. So I have a political activity which very much derives from internal analyses, but that is not to transform my analyses into a law for others.

Mort and Peter: A question now which relates specifically to sexual politics, and to struggles around definitions of sexuality. *La Volonté de Savoir* presents a complex and convincing set of arguments which deconstruct notions of any essential sexuality, and libertarian approaches to sexual politics. The problem remains however that, politically, many people who become involved in sexual politics — whether they are women or gay people — do so precisely because they are often impressed by the suggestive power of arguments which stress a libertarian position, or which emphasise the declaration of some essential or innate sexuality. That is to say, they remain powerful political motives for people who are oppressed. Is it in fact at all possible to abandon those approaches within the political arena, and if we do, what type of political positions can be adopted, which both mobilise and attract popular support, and which are more adequately informed theoretically?

Foucault: In what I have said there was not any criticism in relation to say, the gay movement nor to the women's movement. I think that those strategies were, and are, very important in the struggle to affirm oneself, since people were saying: 'You're only homosexuals', or 'You're only women'. In reply to this it was extremely important to say: 'Why, of course, we are homosexuals, or women'. But now, thinking ahead to the next step, we must consider that the labelling (*épinglage*) of individuals to a sexual identity — men, women, lesbians, homosexuals, paedophiles, no matter what, it doesn't matter — is something which can become dangerous. And that, if it is true that homosexuality for example, in its specificity, was only coined (*découpé*) and distributed within a culture and society such as ours, then we must not give unlimited currency to this homosexuality. We must be convinced, deep down, that 'homosexuality' does not exist.

I think that the direction we must move towards — at least where I would like to move towards — is not to official recognition by the law, the authorities, or society of the right to be homosexual. What I would like to assert is the fact that the authorities and the law have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the sexual behaviour of individuals. Terms such as 'sex', 'sexuality', 'customs', 'morality', 'good manners', 'decency', etc, figure in French law, I don't know whether it is the same in English law. And these words ought not to figure there in any way. It is perfectly understandable that people are prevented from exercising physical violence upon others; whether it is for robbery, or just the pleasure of it — violence should be

outlawed. But sexuality has nothing to do with either the law or social control. And that is the political thesis, if you like, which you find implicitly present in my book *La Volonté de Savoir*.

I don't know whether you read it, but the other day, in an English newspaper called *The Observer* there was a review of *La Volonté de Savoir*. The reviewer said the book was obviously worthless, and since I am a homosexual, it comes as no great surprise to the reviewer that there was nothing of interest in it. The character who said that is of no real significance. In any case, I am not about to complain. I can't see how I could say that it is an insult to call me a homosexual. But the mere fact that there is someone affirming that you are a homosexual — who responds by pinning the discourse taking place all on the fact that one has a particular sexual practice — is something which is inadmissible. That is just an anecdote, but it highlights the fact that the affirmation of a sexual identity does not necessarily always carry a positive value. I have a perfect right to say what I like without being asked how I make love. I believe that sometimes it is tactically important to affirm one's sexuality, but one must not give the authorities, or those who hold power, the right to interrogate one's sexuality, and to ask one's sexual identity.

Mort and Peter: At the conclusion to *La Volonté de Savoir* you indicate possible lines of development — political development — in the field of sexuality. You speak of the necessity of breaking away from the agency of sex, through what you term a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality. You indicate that we should counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures and knowledges, and that the point of focus for the counter-attack against the deployment of sexuality ought to be a stress on bodies and pleasures. Could you elaborate and expand on what you see as a possible strategy here?

Foucault: On that point, unfortunately, I do not have the time, and I'm not sure whether I would be capable of further comment. But what appears to me to be among the most constant and persistent features in the regulation of sexuality in the west, is that we have always privileged desires as opposed to pleasures, which have been neglected or discounted. After all, Christianity did take possession of sexuality, and I have attempted to take account of that fact and to analyse it through the notion of desire and concupiscence. This notion of desire, which becomes the organising principle of sexuality from the Christianity of the fifteenth century, seems to be one which is completely charged with relations of power and relations of knowledge. After all, psychoanalysis is an analysis of desire.

Mort and Peter: What distinction do you observe between *connaissance* and *savoir*? Is there an epistemological distinction?

Foucault: Well, yes. When I say *savoir* there is no English equivalent, so I don't know how to explain it.

Mort and Peter: For both terms we say 'knowledge'.

Foucault: By *connaissance* I understand an act of *savoir*; a set of relations between subject and object which are recognised and validated in systems of *connaissances*, such as science, for example, or the discipline of law, or casuistry. What I call *savoir* is quite simply the ensemble — whatever that includes — of processes used in order to gain knowledge (*prendre connaissance*) of something. The act of *connaissance* is regulated, whilst that of *savoir* designates the whole procedure — whatever it consists of.

Mort and Peter: Would you counter pose some non-western, or oriental, forms of sexuality as a possible means of breaking the dominance of desire?

Foucault: Certainly there are other knowledges and discourses on sexuality. There is what I call an *ars erotica*, such as you find in Japan or China. There you have a very long and extensive discourse on sexuality, or, to be exact, on pleasures, which did not have the function of analysing the domain which we call sexuality. Rather, the concern there is with the techniques by which one attempted to increase sexual pleasure, to intensify it. The *ars erotica* intervened in an economy of pleasure, and formed part of the technique of pleasure. It was not an instrument of knowledge (*connaissance*), turning sexual practice into an object and looking inside it for something other than sexuality — whether they be pleasures or desires.