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The End of the Monarchy of Sex

Q: You inaugurate with *The History of Sexuality* a study of monumental proportions. How do you justify today, Michel Foucault, an enterprise of such magnitude?

MF: Of such magnitude? No, no, rather of such exiguity. I don't wish to write the chronicle of sexual behaviors throughout so many ages and civilizations. I want to follow a much finer thread: the one which has linked in our societies for so many centuries sex and the search for truth.

Q: In precisely what sense?

MF: The problem in fact is the following: how is it that in a society such as ours, sexuality is not simply that which permits us to reproduce the species, the family, and the individual? Not simply something which procures pleasure and enjoyment? How is it that sexuality has been considered the privileged place where our deepest "truth" is read and expressed? For this is the essential fact: that since Christianity, Western civilization has not stopped saying, "To know who you are, know what your sexuality is about." Sex has always been the center where our "truth" of the human subject has been tied up along with the development of our species.

Confession, the examination of conscience, all of the insistence on the secrets and the importance of the flesh, was not simply a means of forbidding sex or of pushing it as far as possible from consciousness, it was a way of placing sexuality at the heart of existence and of connecting salvation to the mastery of sexuality's obscure movements. Sex was, in Christian societies, that which had to be examined, watched over, confessed and transformed into discourse.

Q: Hence the paradoxical thesis which supports the first volume: far from making sexuality their taboo, their major interdiction, our societies have not ceased to speak about sexuality, to make it speak…

MF: They could speak well and often about it, but only to forbid it. But I wished to underline two important things. First, that the bringing to light, the "clarification" of sexuality, did not happen only in discussions, but in the reality of institutions and practices. Secondly, that numerous strict prohibitions exist. But they are part of an economic complex where they might mingle with incitements, manifestations and valorizations. These are the prohibitions that we always insist upon. I would like to refocus the perspective somewhat: seizing in any case the entire complex of operative mechanisms.

And then, you know all too well, that they've made me into the melancholy historian of prohibitions and repressive power, someone who recounts history according to two categories: insanity and its incarceration, anomaly and its exclusion, delinquence and its imprisonment. But my problem has always been on the side of another category: truth. How did the power unfolding in insanity produce psychiatry's "true" discourse? The same thing applies to sexuality: how to recapture the will to know how power exerted itself on sex? I don't want to write the sociological history of a prohibition but rather the political history of a production of "truth."

Q: A new revolution in the concept of history? The dawn of another "new history"?

MF: A few years ago, historians were very proud to have discovered that they could write not only the history of battles, of kings and institutions, but also of the economy. Now they're all dumbfounded because the shrewdest among them learned that it was also possible to write the history of feelings, of behaviors and of bodies. Soon they'll understand that the history of the West cannot be disassociated from the way in which "truth" is produced and inscribes its effects.

We live in a society which is marching to a great extent "towards truth"—I mean a society which produces and circulates discourse which has truth as its function, passing itself off as such and thus obtaining specific powers. The establishment of "true" discourses (which however are incessantly changing) is one of the fundamental problems of the West. The history of "truth"—of the power proper to discourses accepted as true—has yet to be written. What are the positive mechanisms which, producing sexuality in this or that fashion, bring with them misery? In any case, what I would like to study for my part, are all of these mechanisms in our society which invite, incite and force us to speak about sex.

Q: Some would answer that, despite such discourse, repression and sexual misery still exist...

MF: Yes, that objection has been made. You're right: we live more or less in this state of sexual misery. With this said, it's true that this objection is never treated in my book.

Q: Why? Is that a deliberate choice?

MF: When I undertake concrete studies in subsequent volumes on women, children and perverts, I will try to analyze the forms and conditions of misery. But for the moment, it is a question of establishing a method. The problem is to know whether this mystery should be explained negatively by fundamental interdiction or by a prohibition relative to an economic situation ("Work, don't make love") or whether this misery is the effect of procedures which are much more complex and positive.

Q: What could a "positive" explanation be in this case?

MF: I'm going to make a presumptuous comparison. What did Marx do when in his analysis of capital he encountered the problem of working-class misery? He refused the usual explanation which regarded this misery as the effect of a rare natural cause or of a concerted theft. And he said in effect: given what capitalist production is in its fundamental laws, it can't help but to produce misery. Capitalism's raison d'être is not to starve the workers but it cannot develop without starving them. Marx substituted the analysis of production for the denunciation of theft.

Other things being equal, that's approximately what I wanted to say. It's not a question of denying sexual misery, but it's also not a question of explaining it negatively by repression. The whole problem is to understand which are the positive mechanisms that, producing sexuality in such or such a fashion, result in misery.

Here is one example that I will treat in a future volume: at the beginning of the eighteenth century enormous importance was suddenly accorded to childhood masturbation, which was persecuted everywhere as a sudden terrible epidemic threatening to compromise the whole human race. Must we admit that childhood masturbation had suddenly become unacceptable for a capitalist society in the process of development? This is the position of certain recent "Reichians." It does not appear to me to be a satisfying one. On the contrary, what was important at the time was the reorganization of the relations between children and adults, parents and educators: it was an intensification of intra-familial relationships, it was childhood which was at stake for the parents, the educational institutions, for the public health authorities; it was childhood as the breeding ground for the generations to come. At the crossroads of body and soul, of health and morality, of education and training, children's sexuality became at the same time a target and an instrument of power. A specific "children's sexuality" was established: it was precarious, dangerous, to be watched over constantly.

From this resulted a sexual misery of childhood and adolesence from which our generations still have not recovered. The objective was not to forbid. It was to constitute, through childhood sexuality suddenly become important and mysterious, a network of power over children.

Q: This idea that sexual misery arises from repression, and that in order to be happy we must liberate our sexualities, is a fundamental one for sexologists, doctors, and vice squads...

MF: Yes, and that is why they set a fearsome trap for us. They basically tell us: "You have a sexuality, this sexuality is both frustrated and mute, hypocritical prohibitions repress it. So, come to us, show us, confide in us your unhappy secrets..." This type of discourse is in fact a formidable tool of control and power. As always, it uses what people say, feel and hope for. It exploits their temptation to believe that to be happy, it suffices to cross the threshhold of discourse and remove a few prohibitions. It ends up in fact repressing and controlling movements of revolt and liberation.

Q: From this I suppose comes the misunderstanding of certain commentators: "According to Foucault, the repression and liberation of sexuality amounts to the same thing..." Or elsewhere: "Pro-abortion and pro-life movements employ basically the same discourse...."

MF: Yes! These matters have yet to be cleared up. They've had me saying in effect that there is no real difference between the language of condemnation and that of contra-condemnation, between the discourse of prudish movements and that of sexual liberation. They claimed that I was putting them all in the same bag to drown them like a litter of kittens. Completely false: that's not what I wanted to say. The important thing is, however, I didn't say it at all.

Q: But you agree all the same that there are some common standards and components...

MF: But a statement is one thing, discourse another. There are common tactics and opposing strategies.

Q: For example?

MF: I believe the so-called "sexual liberation" movements must be understood as movements of affirmation "beginning with" sexuality. Which means two things: these are movements which take off from sexuality, from the apparatus of sexuality within which we're trapped, which make it function to the limit; but at the same time, these movements are displaced in relation to sexuality, disengaging themselves from it and going beyond it.

Q: What do these outbursts resemble?

MF: Take the case of homosexuality. In the 1870s psychiatrists began to make it into a medical analysis: certainly a point of departure for a whole

series of new interventions and controls. They began either to incarcerate homosexuals in asylums or attempted to cure them. They were formerly perceived as libertines and sometimes as delinquents (from this resulted condemnations which could be very severe—with burning at the stake still occurring in the 18th century, although very rarely). In the future we'll all see them in a global kinship with the insane, suffering from sickness of the sexual instinct. But taking such discourses literally, and thereby even turning them around, we see responses appearing in the form of defiance: "All right, we are what you say we are, whether by nature or sickness or perversion, as you wish. And so if we are, let it be, and if you want to know what we are, we can tell you better than you can." An entire literature of homosexuality, very different from libertine narratives, appeared at the end of the 19th century: think of Oscar Wilde and Gide. It is the strategic return of a "same" will to truth.

Q: That's what is happening in fact for all minorities, women, youths, black Americans...

MF: Yes, of course. For a long time they tried to pin women to their sexuality. They were told for centuries: "You are nothing other than your sex." And this sex, doctors added, is fragile, almost always sick and always inducing sickness. "You are the sickness of man." And towards the 18th century this very ancient movement quickened and ended up as the pathologization of woman: the female body became the medical object par excellence. I will try later to write the history of this "gynecology" in the largest sense of the term.

But the feminist movements have accepted the challenge. Are we sex by nature? Well then, let it be but in its singularity, in its irreducible specificity. Let us draw the consequences from it and reinvent our own type of political, cultural and economic existence... Always the same movement: take off from this sexuality in which movements can be colonized, go beyond them in order to reach other affirmations.

Q: This strategy of double detente which you are describing, is it still a strategy of liberation in the classic sense? Or shouldn't it rather be said that to liberate sex is henceforth to hate it and go beyond it?

MF: A movement is taking shape today which seems to me to be reversing the trend of "always more sex," of "always more truth in sex," a trend which has doomed us for centuries: it's a matter, I don't say of rediscovering, but rather of fabricating other forms of pleasure, of relationships, coexistences, attachments, loves, intensities. I have the impression of hearing today an "anti-sex" grumbling (I'm not a prophet, at most a diagnostician), as if a thorough effort were being made to shake this great "sexography" which makes us decipher sex as the universal secret.

Q: Some symptoms for this diagnosis?

MF: Only one anecdote. A young writer, Hervé Guilbert, had written some children's stories. No editor wanted them. He wrote another text, moreover very remarkable and apparently very "sexy." This was the condition for being heard and published (the book is *La Mort propagande*[1]). Read it: it seems to me to be the opposite of the sexographic writing that has been the rule in pornography and sometimes in good literature: to move progressively toward mentioning what is most unmentionable in sex. Hervé Guibert opens with the worst extreme—"You want us to speak about it, well then, let's go, and you will hear more about it than you ever have before"—and with this infamous material he constructs bodies, mirages, castles, fusions, acts of tenderness, races, intoxications... The entire heavy coefficient of sex has been volatilized. But this here is only one example of the "anti-sex" challenge, of which many other symptoms can be found. It is perhaps the end of this dreary dessert of sexuality, the end of the monarchy of sex.

Q: Provided that we aren't devoted or chained to sex as if to a fatal destiny. And since early childhood, as they say…

MF: Exactly. Look at what is happening as far as children are concerned. Some say: children's life is their sex life. From the bottle to puberty, that's all it is. Behind the desire to learn to read or the taste for comic strips, there is still and will always be sexuality. Well, are you sure that this type of discourse is actually liberating? Are you sure that it doesn't lock children into a sort of sexual insularity? And what after all if they just couldn't care less? If the liberty of not being an adult consisted exactly in not being enslaved to the law of sexuality, to its principles, to its commonplace, would it be so boring after all? If it were possible to have polymorphic relationships with things, people and bodies, wouldn't that be childhood? To reassure themselves, adults call this polymorphism perversity, coloring it thus with the monotonous monochrome of their own sexuality.

Q: Children are oppressed by the very ones who claim to liberate them?

MF: Read the book by René Schérer and Guy Hocquenghem[2]: it shows very well that the child has a flow of pleasure for which the "sex" grid is a veritable prison.

Q: Is this a paradox?

MF: This ensues from the idea that sexuality is fundamentally feared by power; it is without a doubt more a means through which power is exerted.

Q: Look at authoritarian states however. Can we say that there power is exerted not against but through sexuality?

MF: Two recent facts, apparently contradictory. About ten months ago, China began a campaign against children's masturbation, along exactly the same lines as that carried out in 18th century Europe (masturbation prevents work, causes blindness, leads to the degeneration of the species...). On the other hand, before the year is out, the Soviet Union is going to host a congress of psychoanalysts for the first time (the Soviet Union has to host them, since they have none of their own). Liberalization? A thaw on the side of the subconscious? Springtime of the Soviet libido against the moral bourgeoisification of the Chinese?

In Peking's antiquated stupidities and the Soviet Union's new curiosities, I see mainly a double recognition of the fact that, formulated and prohibited, spoken and forbidden, sexuality is a relay station which no modern system of power can do without. We should greatly fear socialism with a sexual face.

Q: In other words, power is no longer necessarily that which condemns and encloses?

MF: In general terms, I would say that the interdiction, the refusal, the prohibition, far from being essential forms of power, are only its limits: the frustrated or extreme forms of power. The relations of power are, above all, productive.

Q: This is a new idea compared with your previous books.

MF: If I wanted to pose and drape myself in a slightly fictive coherence, I would tell you that this has always been my problem: effects of power and the production of "truth." I have always felt ill at ease with this ideological notion which has been used so much in recent years. It has been used to explain errors or illusions, shaded representations—in short, everything that impedes the formation of true discourses. It has also been used to show the relationship between what goes on in peoples' heads and their place in the relations of production. In all, the economy of untruth. My problem is the politics of truth. I have taken a lot of time in realizing it.

Q: Why?

MF: For several reasons. First, because power in the West is what diplays itself the most, and thus what hides itself best. What we have called "political life" since the nineteenth century is (a bit like the court in the age of monarchy) the manner in which power gives itself over to representation. Power is neither there, nor is that how it functions. The relations of power are perhaps among the most hidden things in the social body.

On the other hand, since the 19th century, the critique of society has been essentially carried out, starting with the actual determining nature of the economy. Certainly a healthy reduction of "politics," but also with the tendency to neglect the relations of elementary power that could be constitutive of eco-

nomic relations.

The third reason is the tendency, common to institutions, political parties, and an entire current of revolutionary thought and action, which consists in not seeing power in any other form than that of the state apparatus.

All of which leads, when one turns to individuals, to finding power only in their heads (under the form of representation, acceptation, or interiorization).

Q: And what did you want to do in the face of this?

MF: Four things: investigate what might be most hidden in power relations; anchor them in their economic infrastructures; trace them not only in their governmental forms but also in their infra-governmental or para-governmental ones; and recuperate them in their material play.

Q: At what point did you begin this type of study?

MF: If you want a bibliographical reference, it was in *Discipline and Punish.* But I would rather say that it began with a series of events and experiences since 1968 concerning psychiatry, delinquency, the schools, etc. I believe that these elements themselves would never have been able to take their direction and intensity if there had not been those two gigantic shadows of fascism and Stalinism behind them. If proletarian misery—this sub-existence—caused political thought of the nineteenth century to revolve around the economy, then these super-powers, fascism and Stalinism, induce political anxiety about our present-day societies.

Hence two problems. Power—how does it work? Is it enough that it imposes strong prohibitions in order to function effectively? And does it always move from above to below and from the center to the periphery?

Q: I saw this in *The History of Sexuality,* this shifting, this essential sliding. This time you made a clean break with the diffuse naturalism that haunts your previous books...

MF: What you call "naturalism" designates two things, I believe. A certain theory, the idea that underneath power with its acts of violence and its artifice we should be able to recuperate things themselves in their primitive vivacity: behind the asylum walls, the spontaneity of madness; through the penal system, the generous fever of delinquence; under the sexual interdiction, the freshness of desire. And also a certain aesthetic and moral choice: power is evil, it's ugly, poor, sterile, monotonous, dead; and what power is exercised upon is right, good, rich.

Q: Yes. And finally the theme common to the orthodox Marxist and to the New Left: "Under the cobblestones lies the beach."[3]

MF: If you like. There are moments when such simplifications are necessary. Such a dualism is provisionally useful to change the scenery from time to

time and move from pro to contra.

Q: And then comes the time to stop, the moment of reflection and of regaining equilibrium?

MF: On the contrary. The moment of new mobility and displacement must follow. Because these reversals of pro to contra are quickly blocked, unable to do anything except repeat themselves and form what Jacques Rancière calls the "Leftist doxa." As soon as we repeat indefinitely the same refrain of the anti-repressive ditty, things remain in place—anyone can sing the tune, without anyone paying attention. This reversal of values and of truths, which I was speaking about a while ago, has been important to the extent that it does not stop with simple cheers (long live insanity, delinquency, sex), but it permits new strategies. You see, what often bothers me today, in fact, what really troubles me, is that all the work done in the past fifteen years or so, often under hardship and solitude, functions only for some as a sign of belonging on the "good side" of insanity, children, delinquency, sex.

Q: There is no good side?

MF: One must pass to the other side—the "good side"—but in order to extract oneself from these mechanisms which make two sides appear, in order to dissolve the false unity, the illusory "nature" of this other side with which we have taken sides. This is where the real work begins, that of the historian of the present.

Q: You already have defined yourself several times as an historian. What does it mean? Why "historian" and not "philosopher"?

MF: Under a form as naive as a child's tale, I will say that the question of philosophy has been for a long time: "In this world where all perishes, what doesn't pass away? Where are we, we who must die, in relation to that which doesn't?" It seems to me that, since the 19th century, philosophy has not ceased asking itself the same question: "What is happening right now, and what are we, we who are perhaps nothing more than what is happening at this moment?" Philosophy's question is the question of this present age which is ourselves. This is why philosophy is today entirely political and entirely historical. It is the politics immanent in history and the history indispensable for politics.

Q: But isn't there also a return today to the most classical, metaphysical kind of philosophy?

MF: I don't believe in any form of return. I would say only this, and only half-seriously. The thinking of the first Christian centuries would have had to answer the question: "What is actually going on today? What is this age in

which we live? When and how will this promised return of God take place? What can we do with this intervening time which is superfluous? And what are we, we who are in this transition?

One could say that on this slope of history, where the revolution is supposed to hold back and has not yet come, we ask the same question: "Who are we, we who are superfluous in this age where what should happen is not happening?" All modern thought, like all politics, has been dominated by this question of revolution.

Q: Do you continue, as far as you are concerned, to raise this question of revolution and reflect upon it? Does it remain in your eyes the question par excellence?

MF: If politics has existed since the 19th century, it's because there was revolution. The current one is not a variant or a sector of that one. It's politics that always situates itself in relation to revolution. When Napoleon said, "The modern form of destiny is politics," he was only drawing the consequences from this truth, for he came after the revolution and before the eventual return of another one.

The return of revolution—that is surely our problem. It is certain that without its return, the question of Stalinism would be only an academic one—a mere problem of the organization of societies or of the validity of the Marxist scheme of things. But it's really quite another question concerning Stalinism. You know very well what it is: the very desirability of the revolution is the problem today.

Q: Do you want the revolution? Do you want something more than the simple ethical duty to struggle here and now, at the side of one or another group of mental patients and prisoners, oppressed and miserable?

MF: I have no answer. But I believe that to engage in politics—aside from party politics—is to try to know with the greatest possible honesty whether or not the revolution is desirable. It is in exploring this terrible molehill that politics runs the danger of caving in.

Q: If the revolution were no longer desirable, would politics remain what you say it is?

MF: No, I don't believe so. It would be necessary to invent another one or something which could be a substitute for it. We are perhaps living the end of politics. For it's true that politics is a field which was opened by the existence of the revolution, and if the question of revolution can no longer be raised in these terms, then politics risks disappearing.

Q: Let's return to your politics in *The History of Sexuality.* You say: "Where there is power, there is resistance." Are you not thus bringing back this

nature which a while back you wanted to dismiss?

MF: I don't think so, because this resistance I am speaking of is not a substance. It is not anterior to the power which it opposes. It is coextensive with it and absolutely its contemporary.

Q: The reverse of power? That would come to the same thing. Always the cobblestones under the beach...

MF: It isn't that either. For if it were only that, it wouldn't resist. To resist, it would have to operate like power. As inventive, mobile and productive power. Like power, it would have to organize, coagulate, and solidify itself. Like power, it would have to come from "underneath" and distribute itself strategically.

Q: "Where there is power, there is resistance." It's almost a tautology, consequently...

MF: Absolutely. I am not positing a substance of resistance in the face of power. I am simply saying: as soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance. We are never trapped by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy.

Q: Power and resistance...tactics and strategy...Why this stock of military metaphors? Do you think that power from now on must be thought of in the form of war?

MF: For the moment, I really don't know. One thing seems certain to me; it is that in order to analyze the relationships of power, at present we have only two models at our disposal: the one proposed by law (power as law, interdiction, the institution) and the military or strategic model in terms of power relations. The first has been much used and has proven its inadequate character, I believe. We know very well that law does not describe power.

I know that the other model is also much discussed. But we stop with words: we use ready-made ideas or metaphors ("war of all against all," "struggle for life"), or again formal schemata (strategies are very much in fashion among certain sociologists or economists, especially Americans). I believe that this analysis of power relations should be tightened up.

Q: This military conception of power relations, was it already used by the Marxists?

MF: What strikes me about Marxist analyses is that it's always a question of "class struggle," but less attention is paid to one word in this expression, namely "struggle." Here again qualifications must be made. The greatest of the Marxists (starting with Marx himself) insisted a great deal on "military" problems

(the army as an instrument of the state, armed insurrection, revolutionary war). But when they speak of "class struggle" as the mainspring of history, they worry especially about defining this class, where it is situated, who it encompasses, but never concretely about the nature of the struggle. With one exception, however: Marx's own non-theoretical, historical texts, which are better in this regard.

Q: Do you think that your book can fill such a gap?

MF: I don't make any such claim. In a general way, I think that intellectuals—if this category exists, if it should exist at all, which is not certain nor perhaps even desirable—are renouncing their old prophetic function.

And by that I'm not thinking only of their claim to say what is going to happen, but also of the legislative function which they've aspired to for so long: "See what must be done, see what is good, follow me. In the turmoil you're all in, here is the pivotal point, it's where I am." The Greek sage, the Jewish prophet, and the Roman legislator are still models that haunt those who practice today the profession of speaking and writing. I dream of the intellectual destroyer of evidence and universalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of power, who incessantly displaces himself, doesn't know exactly where he is heading nor what he'll think tomorrow because he is too attentive to the present; who, in passing, contributes the raising of the question of knowing whether the revolution is worth it, and what kind (I mean what kind of revolution and what effort), it being understood that they alone who are willing to risk their lives to bring it about can answer the question.

As for all the questions of classification and programming that we are asked: "Are you a Marxist?" "What would you do if you had power?" "Who are your allies and where are your sympathies?"—these are truly secondary questions compared with the one that I have just indicated. That is the question of today.

Translated by Dudley M. Marchi

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[1] Hervé Guilbert, *La Mort propagande* (Paris: R. Deforges, 1977).

[2] René Schérer and Guy Hocquenghem, *Co-ire* (Paris: Recherches, 1976).

[3] A well-known motto of May '68.