The History of Sexuality, volume 1: An Introduction may be the most widely read of Foucault’s texts in English – for many, to be sure, it is the first book by Foucault that one is likely to read. (As the title tells us, after all, it is “an introduction” – not to mention that it is about sexuality, raising the possibility that there might be something titillating inside.) Despite its popularity, however, it can be easily misread, and The History of Sexuality, volume 1 (henceforth HS1) is far from an ideal introductory text to Foucault. It is nonetheless an indispensable text in Foucault’s oeuvre – not only for a theoretically sophisticated understanding of the construction of sexuality and the exercise of power (two key themes of the work), but also for an understanding of the evolution and “stakes” of Foucault’s own thought.

This essay consists of two parts. The first part attempts to situate and assess HS1. Thus, HS1 constitutes a turning point in Foucault’s thought: it presents Foucault’s mature articulation of disciplinary power while also opening up new analyses of biopower and, in a more radical turn, bringing certain ethical problematics to the fore. As such, its reframing of sexuality has been profoundly inspirational for thinkers and activists alike. The much shorter second part briefly presents HS1’s argument through analyses of each part and chapter.

First, some historical context: HS1 was completed in August 1976 (and published in December 1976), immediately following the completion of Foucault’s 1976 course at the Collège de France, Society Must Be Defended, and one year after his prior book, Discipline and Punish (which is frankly a much better introduction to Foucault). The themes of HS1 had been anticipated several years earlier: in the closing pages of The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969; Foucault’s last book prior to Discipline and Punish), Foucault noted that “I can readily imagine – subject to a great deal of further exploration and examination – archaeologies that might develop in different directions. There is, for example, the archaeological description of ‘sexuality’” (AK, 192–193). He antici-
pated in 1969 that “[s]uch an archaeology would show, if it succeeded in its task, how the prohibitions, exclusion, limitation, values, freedoms, and transgressions of sexuality, all its manifestations, verbal or otherwise, are linked to a particular discursive practice” (AK, 193), and (quite interestingly, as we shall see) he described this project as “[a]n analysis that would be carried out not in the direction of the episteme, but in that of what we might call the ethical” (AK, 193, my italics). Indeed, recalling these earlier projections (even though Foucault’s thought had largely evolved beyond the archaeological frame articulated in 1969), Foucault notes in HS1 itself that “[t]he history of the deployment of sexuality, as it has evolved since the classical age, can serve as an archaeology of psychoanalysis” (HS1, 130).

Although HS1’s English subtitle is An Introduction, the original French subtitle was quite different: La Volonté de savoir, that is, “the will to knowledge.” This subtitle invokes Nietzsche’s famous phrase, “the will to power”: and as we shall see, part of the work of HS1 is to tie sexuality to practices of truth and knowledge. This subtitle also echoes earlier themes in Foucault’s work – his first course at the Collège de France (in 1970–71, just after The Archaeology of Knowledge) was entitled Leçons sur la volonté de savoir (Lectures on the Will to Knowledge) – though this course focused on ancient Greek texts. Moreover Foucault’s more recent work in the mid-1970s had been devoted to articulating a continuum of what he called “power/knowledge”; thus the French subtitle situates the book’s project within that context.

The English subtitle is not without some descriptive merit, however. HS1 was envisioned as the first volume in a six-volume series examining nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses and practices related to sexuality. As such, it was intended to provide an overview and framework for the later, more focused and empirically grounded, volumes, thus functioning as a sort of introduction. The anticipated subsequent volumes were listed on the back cover: The Body and the Flesh; The Children’s Crusade; Woman, Mother, Hysteric; Perverts; and Population and Races (cited in Macey 1995: 354). Throughout HS1, we are given glimpses of what these volumes would have explored. The last four of these five themes are enumerated as “four great strategic unities which, beginning in the eighteenth century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex” (HS1, 103–104). The first theme, “flesh,” represents a pre-history and context for the emergence of these four “specific mechanisms”; “flesh” traces the evolution of the Christian and later psychiatric and psychoanalytic practice of confession – itself a theme that figures largely in this first volume.

Hence, the domain we must analyze in the different studies that will follow the present volume is that deployment of sexuality: its formation on the basis of the Christian notion of the flesh, and its development through the four great strategies that were deployed in the nineteenth century: the sexualization of children, the hysterization of women, the specification of the perverted, and the regulation of populations. (HS1, 113–114)

These subsequent volumes were never published. Yet HS1 does offer very short condensations of what would presumably have been developed in much richer detail in those volumes. For example, with respect to the sexualization of children, Foucault notes how “the pedagogical institution . . . has multiplied the forms of discourse on the subject [children’s sexuality]; it has established various points of implantation for sex:
it has coded contents and qualified speakers” (HS1, 29). While HS1 is often quite schematic (as befits an introductory overview), more detailed analyses of several of these themes were articulated in a number of Foucault’s courses at the Collège de France. Particularly useful in this regard is his 1975 course, *Abnormal*.

Why weren’t the subsequent volumes published? Foucault addressed this question in a 1984 interview:

> By programming my work over several volumes according to a plan laid out in advance, I was telling myself that the time had now come when I could write them without difficulty, and simply unwind what was in my head, confirming it by empirical research. I very nearly died of boredom writing those books. . . . When you know in advance where you’re going to end up, there’s a whole dimension of experience lacking . . . So I changed the general plan . . . (PPC, 47–48; FDE4, 730 [no. 357])

Karl Marx once colorfully explained why an important text (*The German Ideology*) had not been published: “when we received the news that altered circumstances did not allow of its being printed [w]e abandoned the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of the mice all the more willingly as we had achieved our main purpose – self-clarification” (Tucker 1978: 5–6). Foucault is saying something quite similar – completing the subsequent volumes as planned was no longer useful to him, because writing the first volume had reoriented his thinking in different directions.

This change in general plan was quite significant. Following HS1, Foucault did not publish another book for almost eight years, until the months just before his death in 1984. What did finally appear were billed as volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, but these were radically different than what Foucault had initially envisioned, as they focused instead on ancient Greek and Roman practices. These last two volumes, one could say, leave his history of sexuality doubly incomplete: the original project remains unfinished, and the final volumes represent only a partial presentation (focused on sexuality) of the new lines of research that he was investigating through those ancient practices.

Despite its English subtitle, I have suggested, HS1 is not a good first or introductory text for readers of Foucault. There are, I think, four interconnected reasons for its particular difficulty: first, its schematic character (it wasn’t meant to stand alone); second, the rhetorical strategies that Foucault employs in it (the text often shifts voices, and indeed begins in an only subtly marked ironic voice); third, the multiple projects or trajectories that it is attempting to articulate (these include critique of the “repressive hypothesis” and an elaboration of the discursive “deployment of sexuality” and sex as a vehicle for “the truth about ourselves,” as well as an articulation of Foucault’s theory of power, and the emergence of new concerns about populations that push Foucault to rethink his analysis of power) – all of these are concepts whose theoretical and historical presuppositions are often inexplicit (part of the work to be done in later volumes would have been to spell out those presuppositions); and fourth, new tensions and trajectories that are only beginning to emerge as Foucault presents his analysis. In short, there are simply too many different issues being juggled in this text, if one doesn’t already have some sort of Foucauldian framework within which to situate them. As Foucault puts this in HS1,
This history of sexuality . . . is, I realize, a circular project in the sense that it involves two endeavors that refer back to one another. . . . Hence it is a question of forming a different grid of historical decipherment by starting from a different theory of power; and, at the same time, of advancing little by little toward a different conception of power through a closer examination of an entire historical material. (HS1, 90–91)

The structure of Foucault’s argument in HS1 is to challenge something that has been “taken for granted” as “received wisdom”; to reveal it to be in actuality only a partial understanding (at best) or (at worst) entirely misguided; and to offer a new framework or perspective that (sometimes radically) recasts our understanding of what’s really going on. This is what Foucault calls a “circular,” and what we could call a “bootstrapping,” project: the new framework is needed to see why the old, accepted view is mistaken; but it only becomes possible through the recognition of the accepted view’s errors. To make this case, Foucault often shifts voices and perspectives from one that articulates the “accepted” view to one that shows it to be a basic misunderstanding. This structure shapes the overall arc and argument of the book. Writ large, in HS1 Foucault is challenging the accepted idea that sex – and, through sex, society more generally – has been repressed and must be “liberated.” On the contrary, the last two centuries have seen an explosion of discourses about sex, discourses that have increasingly been brought under techniques of control and discipline, specifying individuals and regulating their conduct. Foucault thus directly challenges both psychoanalysis and a number of contemporary political theories. He discusses – and recasts the importance of – Sigmund Freud at several points. Another implicit, though unnamed, target of Foucault’s criticism is critical theorist Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*, which essentially puts forth this “repressive hypothesis.” This structure – challenging and reframing, altering our understanding of, accepted ideas – repeats itself even in more detailed analyses subsumed within the larger arc (hence the multiple trajectories present in the text). Within his analysis of the “repressive hypothesis,” for example, two apparently antithetical discourses on sex – the Christian confession and pornography – are not opposed, but treated as parallel, related practices.

This structure frames Foucault’s larger, underlying concerns, too. His analyses of the repressive hypothesis, and of discourses about sex more generally, serve to reveal two critical, interrelated frameworks that shape these very discourses – truth and power. (Here we find some of Foucault’s most significant and lasting contributions to political theory, sociology, and other disciplines.) Indeed, “sexuality” is defined twice: first as a correlative function of truth (in Part III) and later as a correlative of power relations (in Part IV).

HS1’s first definition of sexuality is as a function of truth:

> It is this deployment that enables something called “sexuality” to embody the truth of sex and its pleasures.  

“Sexuality”: the correlative of that slowly developed discursive practice which constitutes the *scientia sexualis*. The essential features of this sexuality are not the expression of a representation that is more or less distorted by ideology, or of a misunderstanding caused by taboos; they correspond to the functional requirements of a discourse that must produce its truth. (HS1, 68)
Foucault’s discussion of truth in HS1 is focused on the practice of confession, from the Christian pastoral to the psychoanalytic couch – techniques for “extracting the truth from sex” that he here terms “scientia sexualis.” “Truth” becomes a critical underlying, “structural” element that conditions how sexuality and practices like confession of one’s sexual thoughts and desires can take shape and how they can function to define “who one is.” And we can see in this definition how sexuality is defined first by challenging accepted views (ideology, taboo), and then recasting it in a new framework (a discourse’s functional requirements). But HS1’s discussion of truth is clearly incomplete and unfinished; in fact, both negative and positive forms and practices of truth-telling (parrhesia) will become a central subject for Foucault’s work over the next decade.2

We see the same structural or rhetorical motif in HS1’s second definition of sexuality, as a correlative of power relations:

Sexuality must not be defined as a stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely. It appears rather as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power... Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality. (HS1, 103)

And again:

Sexuality... is the name that can be given to a historical construct... a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formulation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (HS1, 105–106)

In short, “sexuality is the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology” (HS1, 127). Here Foucault is grounding sexuality in another key underlying phenomenon – power relations. (Indeed, both of these definitions are ultimately interrelated: more precisely, sexuality is a function of the complex interplay of truth and power, or what Foucault calls “power/knowledge.”) In order to define sexuality as an effect and correlate of power relations, Foucault has to recast our understanding of the basic modes of how power is exercised: power is not top-down, or principally a form of repression, but emerges, from micro-interactions, and is profoundly productive, constitutive of our very identities. Thus a number of traditionally accepted views of power – liberal, Marxist, and psychoanalytic – are challenged and critiqued as only partial, limited analyses that can be restituted and explained within the framework of Foucault’s new understanding of power as productive and disciplinary. This new understanding of power is the most significant contribution of Foucault’s “genealogical” period to political philosophy. As Nancy Fraser (a not uncritical reader of Foucault) observes, “Foucault’s most valuable accomplishment consists of a rich empirical account of the early stages in the emergence of some distinctively modern modalities of power. This account yields important insights into the nature of modern power, and these insights,
in turn, bear political significance” (Fraser 1989: 17–18). HS1, along with Discipline and Punish, represents an absolutely essential articulation of this reconceptualization of power. As Leo Bersani notes, “It is the original thesis of his History [HS1] that power in our societies functions primarily not by repressing spontaneous sexual drives but by producing multiple sexualities, and that through the classification, distribution, and moral rating of those sexualities the individuals practicing them can be approved, treated, marginalized, sequestered, disciplined, or normalized” (Bersani 1995: 81).

What is most striking, however, is that the critical, challenging/reframing structure of HS1’s argument applies not only to others’ views (about sex, truth, or power), but also to Foucault’s own analyses, which are in the process of evolving within HS1 itself. Herein lies HS1’s real value for readers of Foucault. Like The Archaeology of Knowledge, HS1 marks the culmination of one major strand or “period” of Foucault’s thought, while also revealing the tensions that will (perhaps) lead to a rupture and will allow new directions or frameworks to emerge. The Archaeology of Knowledge marked the fulfillment of what has been termed Foucault’s “archaeological” period – it represents Foucault’s fullest theoretical articulation of a certain approach to problems that took discursive structures as the framework for analysis; but in it can already be recognized a shift towards “genealogy,” to analysis framed not exclusively by discourse but instead by analysis of the power relations embedded in both discursive and non-discursive relations and within which those discursive and non-discursive relations are immersed. This genealogical study of power relations, and in particular the emergence of a modern form of power that he termed “disciplinary power” out of an older model of “sovereign power,” was the dominant leitmotif of Foucault’s work throughout the mid-1970s, culminating in Discipline and Punish and HS1. So HS1 articulates the theoretical completion of one model and “period” – the second, “genealogical” period – but it simultaneously brings out the very tensions that will supersede this model, and give rise to the third, “ethical” period. As Marx interpreted history (to again make a comparison with Marx), “[n]o social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of the existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself” (Tucker 1978: 5). The internal contradictions or tensions of one order lead to the emergence of another. So it is with the development of Foucault’s thought: his recognition of tensions or instabilities within his analyses forces that analysis to evolve, and sometimes prompts radical breaks or shifts. But in the case of HS1, we can actually see the emergence of two new directions for analysis – a major reconfiguration of his analysis of power and a shift towards ethical concerns as the frame for his analyses.

First, in HS1 Foucault is literally in the process of rethinking his analysis of modern power – of recognizing that it is not fully articulated according to the disciplinary model that he had developed over the last several years, but that there is a second, macro-level, directed at populations. And so he introduces the term “biopower” to describe this new mode. These two modes are not yet clear and distinct, however. At some points in HS1, Foucault’s discussion amalgamates elements that will be separated into one and the same technology or mechanism – for example, “[A]t the end of the eighteenth century . . . there emerged a [singular] completely new technology of sex . . . sex became a matter that required the social body as a whole [biopower], and virtually all
its individuals [disciplinary power], to place themselves under surveillance” (HS1 116, my brackets). At other points, they are almost distinct – consider this early observation: “Through the political economy of population there was formed a whole grid of observations regarding sex” (HS1 26). Foucault still speaks of macro-level populations in terms of the disciplinary techniques of hierarchical observation. But a few sentences later, he adds:

In time these new measures would become anchorage points for the different varieties of racism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was essential that the state know what was happening with its citizens’ sex, and the use they made of it, but also that each individual be capable of controlling the use he made of it. Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue . . . (HS1, 26)

Here he is, in at least a rudimentary way, distinguishing between the macro-level that will constitute state-knowledge and certain forms of racism and the micro-level of individuals’ own use of sex. And although they are not developed in detail, these connections – tying these macro-forms of power (and sexuality itself) to racism – have also been quite productive for subsequent political theory.³

Later in HS1, Foucault’s discussion of power as the “domain” of sexuality in Part IV is still cast in almost exclusively disciplinary terms. It is, in fact, his most condensed presentation of disciplinary power – though its import extends beyond that one mode of power. But when he turns to the “periodization” of sexuality later in Part IV and especially in Part V, he gradually shifts his discussion to focus on this second form, as he introduces “population” as a key element and target of biopower’s operation: “because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population” (HS1, 137).

In short, Foucault’s understanding of how power operates is undergoing a significant reconfiguration – his analysis of micro-level power in terms of discipline is being supplemented with an analysis of macro-level power in terms of populations, biology, and life. This budding reformulation emerges as tensions that are present but not yet fully resolved in HS1. We can see the directions he is moving in the final, March 11, lecture of his 1976 course at the Collège de France:

From the eighteenth century onward (or at least at the end of the eighteenth century onward) we have, then, two technologies of power which were established at different times and which were superimposed. One technique is disciplinary; it centers on the body, produces individualizing effects, and manipulates the body as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile. And we also have a second technology which is centered not upon the body but upon life: a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population. . . . Both technologies are obviously technologies of the body . . .

What is more, the two sets of mechanisms – one disciplinary and the other regulatory – do not exist at the same level. Which means of course that they are not mutually exclusive and can be articulated with each other. (C-SMD, 249, 250)

A little bit later in this lecture, Foucault offers sexuality as an example of how these two mechanisms are interwoven:

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On the one hand, sexuality, being an eminently corporeal mode of behavior, is a matter for individualizing disciplinary controls that take the form of permanent surveillance... But because it also has procreative effects, sexuality is also inscribed, takes effect, in broad biological processes that concern not the bodies of individuals but the element, the multiple unity of the population. Sexuality exists at the point where body and population meet. And so it is a matter for discipline, but also a matter for regularization. (C-SMD, 251–252)

Sexuality is but one of a few examples that Foucault very briefly sketches in this lecture – its fuller development was to have been effected in the series that HS1 inaugurated. And this is far from Foucault’s final word. This rethinking will take form over the next several years, and is the guiding theme for his 1978 and 1979 Collège de France courses, *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (both of whose titles refer to this second, macro-form of power). We can see the evolution of his understanding of macro-power very clearly delineated in the revisions he made to an essay that was published twice, first in 1976 and again in 1979 (FDE3, 13–27 [no. 168] and FDE3, 725–742 [no. 257]). The second half of this essay, “The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century,” is virtually identical in the two versions, but the first half has been entirely rewritten. That first half of the 1976 version frequently employs an extremely awkward, almost tautological, neologism – “noso-politics” (PK, 167ff; FDE3, 14ff) – to refer to new technologies of public health; its awkwardness reflects, I think, Foucault’s own lack of theoretical clarity. In the 1979 version, however, this neologism has been dropped and the essay reorganized as a much clearer discussion in terms of populations and the kind of power specifically aimed at them – the very ideas that Foucault is initially struggling to grasp in 1976, through the writing of HS1: “The politics of health emerged in the course of the eighteenth century, at the intersection of a new economy of assistance and a management of the social body in its materiality including the biological phenomena proper to a ‘population’” (FDE3, 731). So Foucault is, in HS1, in the process of complicating his analysis of modern power, as he comes to recognize that macro-level power relations are not simply reducible to the micro-level phenomena he has already identified.

The second major recasting and reorientation of Foucault’s thought that can be recognized in HS1 is even more revolutionary than his rethinking of power: HS1 marks (often inexplicitly, unconsciously) the inauguration of Foucault’s final “ethical” period, as it foregrounds issues that will become central problems (questions of identity and “telling the truth about oneself”) and even represents an early attempt to find a framework within which he can engage in ethical analysis.

Foucault’s research in the 1980s is marked by a constellation of themes related to truth and subjectivity – which we can already see in HS1, but which are themselves recast, allowing new elements or capacities to emerge. His work in the “genealogical” period of the 1970s emphasized (or overemphasized) how discourses constitute our identities, how we are disciplined and regulated, specified and normalized by and through power relations; Foucault’s later work will explore the implications of the freedom (itself a necessary condition for the possibility of power relations) to resist and to create oneself. Thus the theme of “aesthetics of existence” will be, for Foucault, a profoundly “ethical” exploration. It is perhaps unsurprising that these themes are
present *in utero* in HS1, just as an emerging concern with power relations can be recognized in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. But we can hear the harbinger of Foucault’s ethical turn quite explicitly near the very end of the book in one of HS1’s most famous, evocative, and puzzling passages:

> It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim . . . to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures. (HS1, 157)

Foucault invokes this trope of “bodies and pleasures” again just two pages later in the book’s penultimate sentence, in a distinctly utopian vision (a vision that echoes the closing image of *The Order of Things*):

> [O]ne day, perhaps, in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow. (HS1, 159)

This trope, though difficult to interpret, gestures toward an ethical project. It can be read in a “merely” personal and political vein, as Robert Nye does:

> [Foucault] was not willing to engage in narrow or confrontational identity politics, which offended him both personally and philosophically. On the other hand, he had no desire to repudiate his own (homo)sexual self, and so he applied himself to the delicate task of reconfiguring a new kind of identity out of the wreckage of the one he had spent a considerable part of his life trying to escape. The famous passages at the end of *Volonté de Savoir* about “bodies and pleasures” were his first efforts to deal with this problem intellectually. (Nye 1996: 235)

But, especially given the analysis of power and knowledge at the core of HS1, this interpretation seems to miss its more profound implications. Elizabeth Grosz asks three questions that get at those deeper implications:

> [I]s it that bodies and pleasures are somehow outside the deployment of sexuality? Or are they neuralgic points within the deployment of sexuality that may be strategically useful in any challenge to the current nexus of desire-knowledge-power? Why are bodies and pleasures a source of subversion in a way that sex and desire are not? (Grosz 1994: 155–156, cited in McWhorter 1999: 111)

David Halperin observes that “bodies and pleasures represented to Foucault an opportunity for effecting, as he says earlier in the same passage, ‘a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality,’ a means of resistance to the apparatus of sexuality” (Halperin 1998: 94–95). Halperin correctly identifies one route that Foucault will develop along his ethical trajectory: exploring the systemic possibilities, and our capacities, for resistance to power relations. (Foucault had earlier speculated in his 1974
College de France course about pleasure as a source or site of patients’ resistance in insane asylums (C-PP, 162–163). One particular form of Foucault’s subsequent exploration of pleasures-as-resistance will be in sadomasochistic practices, which explicitly thematize power relations as a part of the enactment of pleasures.\textsuperscript{4} This will in turn lead to other analytical trajectories (such as friendship), many of which he explored in interviews given to gay magazines.

Although Foucault’s reference to bodies and pleasures as ethical resources in HS1 may be problematic, even unsustainable, what is important about the suggestion is its opening up of the ethical domain. In effect, Foucault was asking what sorts of subjectivities were possible before “desire” became constituted as a defining force in the Christian West. When the final two volumes of the history of sexuality appear in 1984, \textit{The Use of Pleasure} (Volume 2) opens with an introduction that describes how his work has been reoriented. He first notes that “[i]t seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself \textit{qua} subject” (HS2, 6), rather than how we are constituted through power relations. These later volumes will focus on ethics, understood not as a “moral code” (“a rule, a law, or a value” – elements analogous to the conception of power that Foucault had rejected in HS1), but rather as what could be described as an ethical “attitude”: “self-formation as an ‘ethical subject’” (HS2, 28).

What we can hear, in HS1, then, is the process of thinking at work – as it seems to have solved one problem, new ones emerge. As such, in retrospect it can seem unsurprising that Foucault did not complete the originally projected series, and that his research would move in such different directions following this publication. In a 1982 interview Foucault asks, “If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it?” (TS, 9; FDE4, 777 [no. 362]). So just as \textit{The Archaeology of Knowledge} marked the end of an analytical project whose organizing concept was “discourse,” HS1 marks the culmination of a trajectory whose framing theme was power. Thus HS1 presents Foucault’s most condensed articulation of disciplinary power and his initial grappling with its complement, biopower, while also introducing the tensions that inaugurate a new ethical trajectory.

Foucault’s work – and HS1 in particular – has been profoundly inspirational. I will offer just one example. He observes in HS1 that “[o]ur epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities” (HS1, 37), and HS1 has played an important role in the political struggles on behalf of these heterogeneous identities. If the contemporary gay rights movement “began” at the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village in 1969, a new epoch was born in the 1980s in the face of the AIDS epidemic. HS1 constituted an important inspirational source and intellectual toolkit for the activists who organized ACT-UP, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, in response to the crisis.\textsuperscript{5} As David Halperin notes, “The most obvious impetus for gay activists to find political inspiration in \textit{The History of Sexuality, Volume 1}, has come, of course, from AIDS” (Halperin 1995: 27). He elaborates: “it would be difficult to imagine a more powerful or urgent demonstration than the AIDS crisis of the need to conceptualize sexuality, after the manner of Foucault, as ‘an especially concentrated point of traversal for relations of power’” (Halperin 1995: 27, quoting HS1, 103, translation modified by Halperin). Further, “it would also be difficult to imagine a better illustration than the public response to AIDS

ACT UP – which has led a kind of uprising of the sick against their doctors, insurers, health care providers, blood banks, public welfare administrators, prison wardens, medical researchers, drug vendors, and media experts, not to mention their employers and landlords – would seem to furnish a perfect example of a strategic power reversal, a form of resistance made possible by the very apparatus of power/knowledge it was invented to resist. (Halperin 1995: 28–29)

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Having highlighted the core ideas and importance of HS1, let us now take a closer look at how it presents these ideas. HS1 is divided into five parts, each seemingly self-contained, with very little ancillary matter and no introductory or concluding sections. The reader is thus plunged immediately into the discourse with very little to condition or predetermine one’s reception of the text. (Herein lies much of its difficulty.) Nevertheless, through some repetition and some linear development of the argument and perspective – befitting what Foucault has described as a “circular project” (HS1, 90) – the themes that I have already addressed come into focus. Part I, “We ‘Other Victorians’,” presents the “false, accepted view” that Foucault will criticize, and proposes his alternative. Part II, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” develops Foucault’s argument against the repressive hypothesis in two steps – first, by showing that discourse about sexuality has undergone a veritable explosion, incited in a variety of contexts; and second, by delineating how this incitement to discourse serves to specify and individualize us. He also acknowledges an important question: he does not yet know what the ultimate aim is of all these individualizing, controlling techniques. The rest of the book is, in part, an attempt to formulate at least some provisional hypotheses that could address this question. Part III, “Scientia Sexualis,” the most schematic and problematical part of the book, locates sexuality as a problem of knowledge, of truth. Part IV, “The Deployment of Sexuality,” arguably the heart of the book, articulates the new framework – of power relations – that allows us to understand how and why the repressive hypothesis was mistaken. Part V, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” attempts to pull the larger argument together, while considering a few outstanding objections. Some of the tensions that will push Foucault to abandon the proposed six-volume project and reconfigure his thinking about power and ethics can be most clearly recognized in this final part.

We “Other Victorians”

“For a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today” (HS1, 3). This is the opening sentence of HS1. Part I, a very short ten pages in length, opens by articulating a view that, as will later become
clear, Foucault wants to criticize – indeed, by articulating the view whose rejection gives the book its overall arc and theme – that discourse about sex has increasingly come to be repressed and prohibited. But since we have been thrown immediately into the discussion, it is not readily apparent that Foucault means to challenge this claim. Indeed, many readers have initially mistaken this part to be articulating Foucault’s own view, not a view he rejects; it has thus been a source of much confusion. Nevertheless, we are given a few clues to let us know we ought to be suspicious of the claims made here. Our clue in this first sentence is the qualifying phrase “the story goes” – raising a note of caution or skepticism, flagging that this is not necessarily a view Foucault shares. Other similar markers are to be found as Foucault’s presentation of this view continues: “it would seem” in the next paragraph; “Everyone knew,” “we are told,” and “We are informed” in the pages that follow.

Foucault then shifts voice to note several reasons why “[t]his discourse on modern sexual repression holds up well” (HS1, 5). Its story coincides chronologically with the rise of capitalism and a work ethic, thus making it “an integral part of the bourgeois order” (HS1, 5). It also confers what Foucault calls a “speaker’s benefit”: “If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom” (HS1, 6). Thus the task of HS1 is to examine “not only these discourses, but also the will that sustains them [a “will to knowledge”] and the strategic intention that supports them [techniques of power]” (HS1, 8). Three kinds of serious questions or doubts – all of which structure the analysis and the alternative framework that Foucault is attempting to elaborate – can be raised about the “repressive hypothesis”: historical questions (Is sexual repression truly an established historical fact?), historical-theoretical questions (Is power really essentially repressive?), and historico-political questions (Is the critical discourse that articulates the repressive hypothesis really liberatory – as the speaker’s benefit would have it – or is it rather “in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it ‘repression’” (HS1, 10)?) Corresponding to these three doubts, Foucault proposes three hypotheses:

[1] [S]ince the end of the sixteenth century, the “putting into discourse of sex,” far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement; [2] that the techniques of power exercised over sex have not obeyed a principle of rigorous selection, but rather one of dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities; and [3] that the will to knowledge has not come to a halt in the face of a taboo that must not be lifted, but has persisted in constituting – despite many mistakes, of course – a science of sexuality. (HS1, 12–13, my brackets)

The object of these studies, “in short, is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world” (HS1, 11). This regime of power-knowledge-pleasure is the underlying framework that Foucault will attempt to articulate, a framework that has been occluded by the discourse about “repression.”
The Repressive Hypothesis

Each of Part II’s two chapters presents one half of the argument against the “repressive hypothesis”: discourse about sexuality has undergone a veritable explosion; and this incitement to discourse serves to specify and individualize us by implanting a variety of perversions.

Chapter 1, “The Incitement to Discourse,” opens, as did Part I, in unmarked ironic voice, restating the repressive hypothesis. But it quickly shifts and Foucault unambiguously states its conclusion: discourses are not being repressed but are proliferating, especially within the exercise of power:

There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex – specific discourses, different from one another both by their form and by their object. . . But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail. (HS1, 18)

The clearest example of this growth is the Christian pastoral. Its scope expanded until it constituted “the nearly infinite task of telling” of one’s desires and thoughts (HS1, 20). And this pattern was repeated – not repudiated – by the Marquis de Sade and in pornographic texts like the anonymous My Secret Life. These techniques were also “supported and relayed by other mechanisms” (HS1, 23): first, the “public interest” – “police” or proto-biopower – exemplified by “the emergence of ‘population’ as an economic and political problem” (HS1, 25) with sex as a central concern; second, concern about children’s sex, as regulated in secondary schools and other pedagogical and medical institutions (Foucault here also mentions Little Hans, a 1909 case study by Freud); and third, in psychiatry, illustrated by the case of Charles Jouy – a case that Foucault had discussed in greater detail in his March 19, 1975 lecture at the Collège de France (C-AN, 291ff). What all this shows us is that the growth of discourses is not merely a quantitative expansion, but also “a dispersion of centers from which discourses emanated, a diversification of their forms, and the complex deployment of the network connecting them” (HS1, 34).

Chapter 2, “The Perverse Implantation,” analyzes these new discourses about sexuality in terms of the power relations that are exercised through them, arguing that these discourses are best understood as disciplinary techniques that specify and normalize individuals not through interdiction or repression, but through four particular kinds of operation: children are subjected to increasingly complete surveillance; individuals are specified according to types or “identities,” hence the constitution of the “homosexual” and other “perverts” as personages, not mere aberrations; as can be seen in the medicalization of sexuality, these discourses “proceeded through examination and insistent observation” (HS1, 44); finally, these discourses constitute a network that interconnects the various perversions and sexualities into a single grid of power and knowledge. Thus, “[t]he growth of perversion is not a moralizing theme that obsessed the scrupulous minds of the Victorians. It is the real product of the encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures” (HS1, 48). And yet, Foucault notes, he
still does not know what the ultimate aim of these new discourses and types of power is. (HS1, 37).

*Scientia Sexualis*

Part III, the most schematic and problematical of all the parts, locates sexuality as a problem of knowledge, of truth. Here, Foucault attempts to illustrate the “will to knowledge” in the West that “constructed around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth” (HS1, 56) – beginning with the confessional in the Middle Ages and continuing through contemporary psychoanalytic practice – by means of a contrast between “two great procedures for producing the truth of sex” (HS1, 57). In an *ars erotica* (which, he suggests, could be found in China, Japan, India, Rome, and the Arab Muslim societies) “truth is drawn from pleasure itself,” not from a compulsion to constantly speak the truth (HS1, 57). A *scientia sexualis*, on the other hand, is characterized by “procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret: I have in mind the confession” (HS1, 58). The confession, whether limited to select brethren of the Church, or made universal (as it became in the seventeenth century) or endowed with the credibility of science (as in the nineteenth century) is the paradigmatic example of the truth-telling of a *scientia sexualis*. Thus, sexuality is charged with two tasks: “we demand that sex speak the truth,” and “we demand that it tell us . . . the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves” (HS1, 69). In sum, with the confession, “we are dealing not nearly so much with a negative mechanism of exclusion as with the operation of a subtle network of discourses, special knowledges, pleasures, and powers” (HS1, 72). And so the task now confronting a history of sexuality is to “define the strategies of power that are immanent in this will to knowledge” (HS1, 73) – the project for Part IV. The important point is that the confession functions as a technique that fuses knowledge and power about sexuality through the creation and telling of truths about oneself and one’s desires.

Foucault’s contrast between an *ars erotica* and a *scientia sexualis* is clearly a rudimentary, underdeveloped image. Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson criticize it, in fact, as a form of “Orientalism”: “If Orientalism means stereotyping the East and its way of life (either by glorifying it or vilifying it), if it means romanticizing the exotic sexuality of the East (heterosexual or homosexual), then Foucault was probably an Orientalist” (Afary and Anderson 2005: 20). But Foucault very quickly realized that this comparison was too facile, too simplistic, and abandoned it. In a lecture given in Japan in 1978, Foucault acknowledged that the analysis in this part of HS1 was only a sketch; in this lecture he did use the phrase “scientia sexualis” again, but explicitly avoided its contrasting term, “ars erotica” (RC, 118–119; FDE3, 556–557 [no. 233]). Furthermore he develops the contrast much more explicitly as a series of transformations and displacements within the West – between ancient Greek and Roman societies and later Christian ones. Developing this contrast in a more substantive way, and refining and complicating this over-simple comparison, will be one part of the task for much of Foucault’s work in the 1980s.
Part IV, the core of the book, articulates the new framework of power relations that constitute what he terms “the deployment of sexuality.” It thus defines the general perspective through which his analyses are grounded – the “circular” or “bootstrapping” project that HS1 is trying to accomplish. Each of four chapters focuses on one aspect of the project: its objective, its method, its domain, and what Foucault terms its “periodization.”

Chapter 1, “Objective,” opens with a contrast between the new disciplinary conception of power as techniques of individualization with a conception of power as “the law” or “repression.” Whether one begins with repression (as does Freud) or the law (as does Lacan), one is still working with the same underlying conception of power, which Foucault calls the “juridico-discursive” conception. This juridico-discursive view has certain characteristics: power is conceived as fundamentally negative (it operates through rejection, exclusion, etc.); power takes the form of a rule, or law; this law functions through prohibition, or interdiction; these interdictions have the logical form of a censorship; and at all levels power’s apparatuses are uniform and consistent. Power has been understood in this negative way, Foucault suggests, because this masking of its true methods and techniques serves to make it tolerable and accepted. But Foucault’s objective in HS1 – his circular project in which he must posit an alternative to expose the errors in the accepted view – is to construct a different “definition of the specific domain formed by relations of power,” and “a determination of the instruments that will make possible its analysis” (HS1, 82). The new techniques of power that Foucault has been describing cannot be understood according to this older juridico-discursive conception.

So the next task, in chapter 2, “Method,” is to define what this new form of power is. Foucault distinguishes it from three mistaken accounts (liberal accounts of the state, psychoanalytic accounts of the rule, and Marxist accounts of class domination) and defines it as:

the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (HS1, 92–93)

This is clearly a dense passage. Indeed, this passage articulates Foucault’s analysis of modern power – encompassing both disciplinary power, which he understands quite well, and the newly emerging biopower, which he is just coming to grasp. From this definition, several corollaries or “methodical rules” can be enumerated: first, power is immanent in other kinds of relations (like relations of sex, and relations of truth); second, power is not static, but constitutes “‘matrices of transformations’” (HS1, 99); third, power is constituted through both micro-tactics and macro-strategies, the inter-
play of the local and the global (anticipating a clearer distinction between disciplinary and bio-powers); and finally, power is not uniform or univocal but rather is constituted by “a multiplicity of discursive elements” (HS1, 100). This is, in sum, a “strategical model” of power, in contrast to the juridico-discursive model based on law.7

Given this understanding of power, sexuality – the “Domain” (chapter 3) of this study – must be understood not as a psychic drive but as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (HS1, 103), in other words, as constituted by and through power relations. Here Foucault is able to delineate the scope of the anticipated volumes to follow: “four great strategic unities which, beginning in the eighteenth century, formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex” (HS1, 103). They are, as we have seen, the hysterization of women’s bodies, the pedagogization of children’s sex, the socialization of procreative behavior, and the psychiatrization of perverse pleasure (as well as a fifth volume on confession and “flesh”). These four strategic unities constitute the “deployment of sexuality” which arises to displace an older “deployment of alliance” or kinship systems. This deployment of sexuality recasts the role of the family in society, making it, too, a transfer point for discourses and techniques that control our sexuality – moreover, he notes, “[t]his was the context in which psychoanalysis set to work” (HS1, 112). Proposing an answer to the question from Part II about the ultimate aims of this incitement to discourse, Foucault suggests that “[t]he deployment of sexuality has its reason for being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way” (HS1, 107).

What, then, is the scope, or “Periodization” (chapter 4) of these analyses? Chronologically, two key ruptures mark its emergence: “around the middle of the sixteenth century, the development of procedures of direction and examination of conscience; and at the advent of the nineteenth century, the advent of medical technologies of sex” (HS1, 119). But the deployment of sexuality is effected differently in the bourgeois than in the working classes: it developed first and most rigorously among the bourgeois, and only spread to workers as it became more biopolitical, targeted at populations through birth control and public health “for the sake of a general protection of society and the race” (HS1, 122). Though the deployment of sexuality does not function as a form of repression, the origins of the theory of repression can be seen in the deployment of sexuality’s extension to the working classes (HS1, 127–129). We have thus come full circle: Foucault has refuted the repressive hypothesis, constructed his alternative hypothesis, and has now offered an explanation, in terms of his new hypothesis, for the repressive hypothesis’s first appearance.

Right of Death and Power over Life

Part V opens by situating this history of sexuality within a chronologically broader analysis of power relations – analysis that Foucault had undertaken in more detail in his 1974 Collège de France course and in Discipline and Punish. Namely, it situates the emergence of the deployment of sexuality with respect to the transformation of older (but not yet entirely effaced) sovereign forms of power into the modern forms
of disciplinary power and (as he emphasizes here), the macro-forms of biopower. Sovereign power was marked by the right to compel one’s subjects’ death – indirectly, through war (the sovereign’s subjects put themselves at risk of death in battle), to defend country or royal person; and directly, through execution, if the sovereign or the laws have been threatened or broken. Beginning in the eighteenth century, however, this “right of death” was replaced by a “power over life” through administration – the biopolitical regulation and control of birth rates, of diseases as a problem of public health, etc. “[O]ne would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life” (HS1, 143). Here sex becomes the “transfer point” or “pivot” between disciplinary controls of individuals’ bodies and biopolitical regulation of the “social body.” And the transition to this new model of “power over life,” the transition from a deployment of alliance to a deployment of sexuality, has several very important, disturbing consequences: first, norms become much more important as vehicles for the exercise of power (both disciplinary and biopolitical) – thus creating what we could call “a normalizing society” (HS1, 144); second, eugenics and “racism in its modern, ‘biologizing,’ statist form” gain techniques that strengthen and *seem* to justify them (HS1, 149).

HS1 opened by presenting the mistaken, if dominant, view that “[f]or a long time, the story goes, we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today” (HS1, 3). Foucault closes by noting that in fact, “We, on the other hand, are in . . . a society ‘with a sexuality’: the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used” (HS1, 147). The dynamic interplay that this situation imposes upon us – between power and freedom; between bodies, life, subjectivity, and truth – emerges in HS1 as unresolved problems that will guide Foucault’s thinking for the next decade, that is, for the remainder of his life.

**Notes**

1 “Bootstrapping” is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “To make use of existing resources or capabilities to raise (oneself) to a new situation or state; to modify or improve by making use of what is already present.” (“bootstrap, v.” OED online, http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/21553 (accessed March 24, 2011).)

2 He explicitly takes up the theme of confession, for example, in a 1981 lecture series given in Belgium, *Mal faire, dire vrai: Fonctions de l’aveu* (*Do Evil, Tell the Truth: Functions of the Confession*), in his last two courses at the Collège de France (C-GSO and C-CT) and in a 1983 lecture course at the University of California (FS). The related practices of self-examination are also a continuing focal point for Foucault’s continuing study of sexuality and truth after HS1.

3 Examples include Mendieta (2002) and McWhorter (2009).

4 This line of inquiry is most explicitly (but not exclusively) discussed in a 1982 interview for the gay magazine, *The Advocate*, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity” (DE358, in EW1, 163–173). This exploration opens up the possibility for ethical relations that cannot be reduced to, or exhaustively analyzed in terms of, power relations – see Lynch (1998) for the development of this opening.
A brief history of ACT-UP in New York is available in Stoller (1998), whose title – “Foucault in the Streets: New York City Act(s) UP” – is illustrative of the inspiration Foucault’s work has had on this movement.

The term “ars erotica” does come up again in an interview conducted on the last day of Foucault’s 1978 trip to Japan. But it was introduced by Foucault’s Japanese interlocutor, who wished to contrast ancient and modern Japanese society, and Foucault characterizes his notion of an “ars erotica” as rudimentary (FDE3, 525–526 [no. 320]).

For a much fuller elaboration of the analysis of power in this chapter of HS1, see Lynch (2011).

References


