from Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction

I

The Incitement

to Discourse

The seventeenth century, then, was the beginning of an age

of repression emblematic of what we call the bourgeois societies,

an age which perhaps we still have not completely left

behind. Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult

and more costly. As if in order to gain mastery over it

in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the

level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge

it from the things that were said, and extinguish the

words that rendered it too visibly present. And even these

prohibitions, it seems, were afraid to name it. Without even

having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able

to ensure that one did not speak of sex, merely through the

interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another:

instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed

silence. Censorship.

Yet when one looks back over these last three centuries

with their continual transformations, things appear in a very

different light: around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable

discursive explosion. We must be clear on this point, however.

It is quite possible that there was an expurgation-and

a very rigorous one-of the authorized vocabulary. It may

indeed be true that a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor

was codified. Without question, new rules of propriety

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screened out some words: there was a policing of statements.

A control over enunciations as well: where and when it was

not possible to talk about such things became much more

strictly defined; in which circumstances, among which

speakers, and within which social relationships. Areas were

thus established, if not of utter silence, at least of tact and

discretion: between parents and children, for instance, or

teachers and pupils, or masters and domestic servants. This

almost certainly constituted a whole restrictive economy,

one that was incorporated into that politics of language and

speech-spontaneous on the one hand, concerted on the

other-which accompanied the social redistributions of the

classical period.

At the level of discourses and their domains, however,

practically the opposite phenomenon occurred. There was a

steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex-specific

discourses, different from one another both by their

form and by their object: a discursive ferment that gathered

momentum from the eighteenth century onward. Here I am

thinking not so much of the probable increase in "illicit"

discourses, that is, discourses of infraction that crudely

named sex by way of insult or mockery of the new code of

decency; the tightening up of the rules of decorum likely did

produce, as a countereffect, a valorization and intensification

of indecent speech. 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.

Consider the evolution of the Catholic pastoral and the

sacrament of penance after the Council of Trent. Little by

little, the nakedness of the questions formulated by the confession

manuals of the Middle Ages, and a good number of

those still in use in the seventeenth century, was veiled. One

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avoided entering into that degree of detail which some authors,

such as Sanchez or Tamburini, had for a long time

believed indispensable for the confession to be complete:

description of the respective positions of the partners, the

postures assumed, gestures, places touched, caresses, the precise

moment of pleasure-an entire painstaking review of the

sexual act in its very unfolding. Discretion was advised, with

increasing emphasis. The greatest reserve was counseled

when dealing with sins against purity: "This matter is similar

to pitch, for, however one might handle it, even to cast it far

from oneself, it sticks nonetheless, and always soils. "l And

later, Alfonso de' Liguori prescribed starting-and possibly

going no further, especially when dealing with childrenwith

questions that were "roundabout and vague."2

But while the language may have been refined, the scope

of the confession-the confession of the flesh-continually

increased. This was partly because the Counter Reformation

busied itself with stepping up the rhythm of the yearly confession

in the Catholic countries, and because it tried to

impose meticulous rules of self-examination; but above all,

because it attributed more and more importance in penance

-and perhaps at the expense of some other sins-to all the

insinuations of the flesh: thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings,

delectations, combined movements of the body and

the soul; henceforth all this had to enter, in detail, into the

process of confession and guidance. According to the new

pastoral, sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects,

its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their

slenderest ramifications: a shadow in a daydream, an image

too slowly dispelled, a badly exorcised complicity between

the body's mechanics and the mind's complacency: everything

had to be told. A twofold evolution tended to make the

flesh into the root of all evil, shifting the most important

moment of transgression from the act itself to the stirrings

IPaolo Segneri, L'Instruction du penitent (French trans. 1695), p. 301.

'Alfonso de' Liguori, Pratique des confesseurs (French trans. 1854), p. 140.

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-so difficult to perceive and formulate-of desire. For this

was an evil that afflicted the whole man, and in the most

secret of forms: "Examine diligently, therefore, all the faculties

of your soul: memory, understanding, and will. Examine

with precision all your senses as well. . . . Examine, moreover,

all your thoughts, every word you speak, and all your

actions. Examine even unto your dreams, to know if, once

awakened, you did not give them your consent. And finally,

do not think that in so sensitive and perilous a matter as this,

there is anything trivial or insignificant."3 Discourse, therefore,

had to trace the meeting line of the body and the soul,

following all its meanderings: beneath the surface of the sins,

it would lay bare the unbroken nervure of the flesh. Under

the authority of a language that had been carefully expurgated

so that it was no longer directly named, sex was taken

charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed

to allow it no obscurity, no respite.

It was here, perhaps, that the injunction, so peculiar to the

West, was laid down for the first time, in the form of a

general constraint. I am not talking about the obligation to

admit to violations of the laws of sex, as required by traditional

penance; but of the nearly infinite task of tellingtelling

oneself and another, as often as possible, everything

that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures,

sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the

soul, had some affinity with sex. This scheme for transforming

sex into discourse had been devised long before in an

ascetic and monastic setting. The seventeenth century made

it into a rule for everyone. It would seem in actual fact that

it could scarcely have applied to any but a tiny elite; the great

majority of the faithful who only went to confession on rare

occasions in the course of the year escaped such complex

prescriptions. But the important point no doubt is that this

obligation was decreed, as an ideal at least, for every good

'Segneri, L'/nstruction du penitent, pp. 301-2.

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Christian. A n imperative was established: Not only will you

confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to

transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse. Insofar

as possible, nothing was meant to elude this dictum,

even if the words it employed had to be carefully neutralized.

The Christian pastoral prescribed as a fundamental duty the

task of passing everything having to do with sex through the

endless mill of speech.4 The forbidding of certain words, the

decency of expressions, all the censorings of vocabulary,

might well have been only secondary devices compared to

that great sUbjugation: ways of rendering it morally acceptable

and technically useful.

One could plot a line going straight from the seventeenthcentury

pastoral to what became its projection in literature,

"scandalous" literature at that. "Tell everything," the directors

would say time and again: "not only consummated acts,

but sensual touchings, all impure gazes, all obscene remarks

. . . all consenting thoughts."j Sade takes up the injunction

in words that seem to have been retranscribed from the

treatises of spirtual direction: "Your narrations must be

decorated with the most numerous and searching details; the

precise way and extent to which we may judge how the

passion you describe relates to human manners and man's

character is determined by your willingness to disguise no

circumstance; and what is more, the least circumstance is apt

to have an immense influence upon the procuring of that

kind of sensory irritation we expect from your stories."6 And

again at the end of the nineteenth century, the anonymous

author of My Secret Life submitted to the same prescription;

outwardly, at least, this man was doubtless a kind of tradi'

The reformed pastoral also laid down rules, albeit in a more discreet way, for

putting sex into discourse. This notion will be developed in the next volume, The

Body and the Flesh.

'Alfonso de' Liguori, Preceptes sur Ie sixieme commandement (French trans. 1835),

p. 5.

'Donatien-Alphonse de Sade, The 120 Days of Sodom. trans. Austryn Wainhouse

and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 271.

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tional libertine; but he conceived the idea of complementing

his life-which he had almost totally dedicated to sexual

activity-with a scrupulous account of every one of its episodes.

He sometimes excuses himself by stressing his concern

to educate young people, this man who had eleven volumes

published, in a printing of only a few copies, which were

devoted to the least adventures, pleasures, and sensations of

his sex. It is best to take him at his word when he lets into

his text the voice of a pure imperative: "I recount the facts,

just as they happened, insofar as I am able to recollect them;

this is all that I can do"; "a secret life must not leave out

anything; there is nothing to be ashamed of . . . one can never

know too much concerning human nature."7 The solitary

author of My Secret Life often says, in order to justify his

describing them, that his strangest practices undoubtedly

were shared by thousands of men on the surface of the earth.

But the guiding principle for the strangest of these practices,

which was the fact of recounting them all, and in detail, from

day to day, had been lodged in the heart of modern man for

over two centuries. Rather than seeing in this singular man

a courageous fugitive from a "Victorianism" that would have

compelled him to silence, I am inclined to think that, in an

epoch dominated by (highly prolix) directives enjoining discretion

and modesty, he was the most direct and in a way the

most naive representative of a plurisecular injunction to talk

about sex. The historical accident would consist rather of the

reticences of "Victorian puritanism"; at any rate, they were

a digression, a refinement, a tactical diversion in the great

process of transforming sex into discourse.

This nameless Englishman will serve better than his queen

as the central figure for a sexuality whose main features were

already taking shape with the Christian pastoral. Doubtless,

in contrast to the latter, for him it was a matter of augmenting

the sensations he experienced with the details of what he

'Anonymous, My Secret Life. (New York: Grove Press, 1966).

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said about them; like Sade, he wrote "for his pleasure alone,"

in the strongest sense of the expression; he carefully mixed

the editing and rereading of his text with erotic scenes which

those writer's activities repeated, prolonged, and stimulated.

But after all, the Christian pastoral also sought to produce

specific effects on desire, by the mere fact of transforming it

-fully and deliberately-into discourse: effects of mastery

and detachment, to be sure, but also an effect of spiritual

reconversion, of turning back to God, a physical effect of

blissful suffering from feeling in one's body the pangs of

temptation and the love that resists it. This is the essential

thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries

to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since

the classical age there has been a constant optimization and

an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that

this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple

effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and

modification of desire itself. Not only were the boundaries of

what one could say about sex enlarged, and men compelled

to hear it said; but more important, discourse was connected

to sex by a complex organization with varying effects, by a

deployment that cannot be adequately explained merely by

referring it to a law of prohibition. A censorship of sex?

There was installed rather an apparatus for producing an

ever greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning

and taking effect in its very economy.

This technique might have remained tied to the destiny of

Christian spirituality ifit had not been supported and relayed

by other mechanisms. In the first place, by a "public interest."

Not a collective curiosity or sensibility; not a new mentality;

but power mechanisms that functioned in such a way

that discourse on sex-for reasons that will have to be examined-

became essential. Toward the beginning of the eighteenth

century, there emerged a political, economic, and

technical incitement to talk about sex. And not so much in

the form of a general theory of sexuality as in the form of

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analysis, stocktaking, classification, and specification, of

quantitative or causal studies. This need to take sex "into

account," to pronounce a discourse on sex that would not

derive from morality alone but from rationality as well, was

sufficiently new that at first it wondered at itself and sought

apologies for its own existence. How could a discourse based

on reason speak of that? "Rarely have philosophers directed

a steady gaze to these objects situated between disgust and

ridicule, where one must avoid both hypocrisy and scandal."

g And nearly a century later, the medical establishment,

which one might have expected to be less surprised by what

it was about to formulate, still stumbled at the moment of

speaking: "The darkness that envelops these facts, the shame

and disgust they inspire, have always repelled the observer's

gaze . . . . For a long time I hesitated to introduce the loathsome

picture into this study."9 What is essential is not in all

these scruples, in the "moralism" they betray, or in the hypocrisy

one can suspect them of, but in the recognized necessity

of overcoming this hesitation. One had to speak of sex;

one had to speak publicly and in a manner that was not

determined by the division between licit and illicit, even if the

speaker maintained the distinction for himself (which is what

these solemn and preliminary declarations were intended to

show): one had to speak of it as of a thing to be not simply

condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems

of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to

function according to an optimum. Sex was not something

one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. It was

in the nature of a public potential; it called for management

procedures; it had to be taken charge of by analytical discourses.

In the eighteenth century, sex became a "police"

matter-in the full and strict sense given the term at the time:

not the repression of disorder, but an ordered maximization

'Condorcet, cited by Jean-Louis Flandrin, Families: parente, maison, sexualite dans

l'ancienne societe, (Paris: Hachette, 1976).

'Auguste Tardieu, Etude medico-legale sur les attentats aux moeurs (1857), p. 114.

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of collective and individual forces: "We must consolidate and

augment, through the wisdom of its regulations, the internal

power of the state; and since this power consists not only in

the Republic in general, and in each of the members who

constitute it, but also in the faculties and talents of those

belonging to it, it follows that the police must concern themselves

with these means and make them serve the public

welfare. And they can only obtain this result through the

knowledge they have of those different assets. "lO A policing

of sex: that is, not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of

regulating sex through useful and public discourses.

A few examples will suffice. One of the great innovations

in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the

emergence of "population" as an economic and political

problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or

labor capacity, population balanced between its own growth

and the resources it commanded. Governments perceived

that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with

a "people," but with a "popUlation," with its specific

phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates,

life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses,

patterns of diet and habitation. All these variables

were situated at the point where the characteristic movements

of life and the specific effects of institutions intersected:

"States are not populated in accordance with the

natural progression of propagation, but by virtue of their

industry, their products, and their different institutions.

. . . Men multiply like the yields from the ground and in

proportion to the advantages and resources they find in their

labors."ll At the heart of this economic and political problem

of population was sex: it was necessary to analyze the birthrate,

the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate

births, the precocity and frequency of sexual relations, the

ways of making them fertile or sterile, the effects of un marIOJohann

von Justi, Elements gene􀂦aux de police (French trans. 1769), p. 20.

llClaude-Jacques Herbert, Essai sur fa police generafe des grains (1753), pp. 320-1.

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ried life or of the prohibitions, the impact of contraceptive

practices-of those notorious "deadly secrets" which

demographers on the eve of the Revolution knew were already

familiar to the inhabitants of the countryside.

Of course, it had long been asserted that a country had to

be populated if it hoped to be rich and powerful; but this was

the first time that a society had affirmed, in a constant way,

that its future and its fortune were tied not only to the

number and the uprightness of its citizens, to their marriage

rules and family organization, but to the manner in which

each individual made use of his sex. Things went from ritual

lamenting over the unfruitful debauchery of the rich, bachelors,

and libertines to a discourse in which the sexual conduct

of the population was taken both as an object of analysis and

as a target of intervention; there was a progression from the

crudely populationist arguments of the mercantilist epoch to

the much more subtle and calculated attempts at regulation

that tended to favor or discourage-according to the objectives

and exigencies of the moment-an increasing birthrate.

Through the political economy of population there was

formed a whole grid of observations regarding sex. There

emerged the analysis of the modes of sexual conduct, their

determinations and their effects, at the boundary line of the

biological and the economic domains. There also appeared

those systematic campaigns which, going beyond the traditional

means-moral and religious exhortations, fiscal measures-

tried to transform the sexual conduct of couples into

a concerted economic and political behavior. 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, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses,

special know ledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it.

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The situation was similar in the case of children's sex. It

is often said that the classical period consigned it to an

obscurity from which it scarcely emerged before the Three

Essays or the beneficent anxieties of Little Hans. It is true

that a longstanding "freedom" of language between children

and adults, or pupils and teachers, may have disappeared.

No seventeenth-century pedagogue would have publicly advised

his disciple, as did Erasmus in his Dialogues, on the

choice of a good prostitute. And the boisterous laughter that

had accompanied the precocious sexuality of children for so

long-and in all social classes, it seems-was gradually

stifled. But this was not a pl􀑐in and simple imposition of

silence. Rather, it was a new regime of discourses. Not any

less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said

in a different way; it was different people who said them,

from different points of view, and in order to obtain different

results. Silence itself-the things one declines to say, or is

forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between

different speakers-is less the absolute limit of discourse, the

other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary,

than an element that functions alongside the things said, with

them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There

is no binary division to be made between what one says and

what one does not say; we must try to determine the different

ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those

who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of

discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required

in either case. There is not one but many silences, and

they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and

permeate discourses.

Take the secondary schools of the eighteenth century, for

example. On the whole, one can have the impression that sex

was hardly spoken of at all in these institutions. But one only

has to glance over the architectural layout, the rules of discipline,

and their whole internal organization: the question of

sex was a constant preoccupation. The builders considered it

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explicitly. The organizers took it permanently into account.

All who held a measure of authority were placed in a state

of perpetual alert, which the fixtures, the precautions taken,

the interplay of punishments and responsibilities, never

ceased to reiterate. The space for classes, the shape of the

tables, the planning of the recreation lessons, the distribution

of the dormitories (with or without partitions, with or without

curtains), the rules for monitoring bedtime and sleep

periods-all this referred, in the most prolix manner, to the

sexuality of children.12 What one might call the internal

discourse of the institution-the one it employed to address

itself, and which circulated among those who made it function-

was largely based on the assumption that this sexuality

existed, that it was precocious, active, and ever present. But

this was not all: the sex of the schoolboy became in the course

of the eighteenth century-and quite apart from that of

adolescents in general-a public problem. Doctors counseled

the directors and professors of educational establishments,

but they also gave their opinions to families; educators designed

projects which they submitted to the authorities;

schoolmasters turned to students, made recommendations to

them, and drafted for their benefit books of exhortation, full

of moral and medical examples. Around the schoolboy and

his sex there proliferated a whole literature of precepts, opinions,

observations, medical advice, clinical cases, outlines for

reform, and plans for ideal institutions. With Basedow and

the German "philanthropic" movement, this transformation

of adolescent sex into discourse grew to considerable dimensions.

Salzmann even organized an experimental school

12Reglement de police pour les lycees (1809). art. 67: "There shall always be, during

class and study hours, an instructor watching the exterior, so as to prevent students

who have gone out to relieve themselves from stopping and congregating.

art. 68: "After the evening prayer, the students will be conducted back to the

dormitory, where the schoolmasters will put them to bed at once.

art. 69: "The masters will not retire except after having made certain that every

student is in bed.

art. 70: "The beds shall be separated by partitions two meters in height. The

dormitories shall be illuminated during the night."

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which owed its exceptional character to a supervision and

education of sex so well thought out that youth's universal

sin would never need to be practiced there. And with all

these measures taken, the child was not to be simply the mute

and unconscious object of attentions prearranged between

adults only; a certain reasonable, limited, canonical, and

truthful discourse on sex was prescribed for him-a kind of

discursive orthopedics. The great festival organized at the

Philanthropinum in May of 1 776 can serve as a vignette in

this regard. Taking the form of an examination, mixed with

floral games, the awarding of prizes, and a board of review,

this was the first solemn communion of adolescent sex and

reasonable discourse. In order to show the success of the sex

education given the students, Basedow had invited all the

dignitaries that Germany could muster (Goethe was one of

the few to decline the invitation). Before the assembled public,

one of the professors, a certain Wolke, asked the students

selected questions concerning the mysteries of sex, birth, and

procreation. He had them comment on engravings that depicted

a pregnant woman, a couple, and a cradle. The replies

were enlightened, offered without shame or embarrassment.

No unseemly laughter intervened to disturb them-except

from the very ranks of an adult audience more childish than

the children themselves, and whom Wolke severely reprimanded.

At the end, they all applauded these cherub-faced

boys who, in front of adults, had skillfully woven the gar􀑑

lands of discourse and sex.1J

It would be less than exact to say that the pedagogical

institution has imposed a ponderous silence on the sex of

children and adolescents. On the contrary, since the eighteenth

century it has multiplied the forms of discourse on the

subject; it has established various points of implantation for

sex; it has coded contents and qualified speakers. Speaking

IJ Johann Gottlieb Schum mel. Fritzens Reise nach Dessau (1776), cited by Auguste

Pinloche, La Reforme de l'education en Allemagne au XVIII' siecle (1889), pp.

125-9.

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about children's sex, inducing educators, physicians, administrators,

and parents to speak of it, or speaking to them

about it, causing children themselves to talk about it, and

enclosing them in a web of discourses which sometimes address

them, sometimes speak about them, or impose canonical

bits of knowledge on them, or use them as a basis for

constructing a science that is beyond their grasp-all this

together enables us to link an intensification of the interventions

of power to a multiplication of discourse. The sex of

children and adolescents has become, since the eighteenth

century, an important area of contention around which innumerable

institutional devices and discursive strategies have

been deployed. It may well be true that adults and children

themselves were deprived of a certain way of speaking about

sex, a mode that was disallowed as being too direct, crude,

or coarse. But this was only the counterpart of other discourses,

and perhaps the condition necessary in order for

them to function, discourses that were interlocking, hierarchized,

and all highly articulated around a cluster of power

relations.

One could mention many other centers which in the eighteenth

or nineteenth century began to produce discourses on

sex. First there was medicine, via the "nervous disorders";

next psychiatry, when it set out to discover the etiology of

mental illnesses, focusing its gaze first on "excess," then

onanism, then frustration, then "frauds against procreation,"

but especially when it annexed the whole of the sexual

perversions as its own province; criminal justice, too, which

had long been concerned with sexuality, particularly in the

form of "heinous" crimes and crimes against nature, but

which, toward the middle of the nineteenth century, broadened

its jurisdiction to include petty offenses, minor indecencies,

insignificant perversions; and lastly, all those social

controls, cropping up at the end of the last century, which

screened the sexuality of couples, parents and children, dangerous

and endangered adolescents-undertaking to protect,

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separate, and forewarn, signaling perils everywhere, awakening

people's attention, calling for diagnoses, piling up reports,

organizing therapies. These sites radiated discourses

aimed at sex, intensifying people's awareness of it as a constant

danger, and this in turn created a further incentive to

talk about it.

One day in 1 867, a farm hand from the village of Lapcourt,

who was somewhat simple-minded, employed here then

there, depending on the season, living hand-to-mouth from

a little charity or in exchange for the worst sort of labor,

sleeping in barns and stables, was turned in to the authorities.

At the border of a field, he had obtained a few caresses from

a little girl, just as he had done before and seen done by the

village urchins round about him; for, at the edge of the wood,

or in the ditch by the road leading to Saint-Nicolas, they

would play the familiar game called "curdled milk. " So he

was pointed out by the girl's parents to the mayor of the

village, reported by the mayor to the gendarmes, led by the

gendarmes to the judge, who indicted him and turned him

over first to a doctor, then to two other experts who not only

wrote their report but also had it published. 14 What is the

significant thing about this story? The pettiness of it all; the

fact that this everyday occurrence in the life of village sexuality,

these inconsequential bucolic pleasures, could become,

from a certain time, the object not only of a collective intolerance

but of a judicial action, a medical intervention, a careful

clinical examination, and an entire theoretical elaboration.

The thing to note is that they went so far as to measure the

brainpan, study the facial bone structure, and inspect for

possible signs of degenerescence the anatomy of this personage

who up to that moment had been an integral part of

village life; that they made him talk; that they questioned

him concerning his thoughts, inclinations, habits, sensations,

and opinions. And then, acquitting him of any crime, they

\4 H. Bonnet and J. Bulard, Rapport medico-legal sur l'etat mental de Ch. -J. Jouy.

January 4, 1968.

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decided finally to make him into a pure object of medicine

and knowledge-an object to be shut away till the end of his

life in the hospital at Mareville, but also one to be made

known to the world of learning through a detailed analysis.

One can be fairly certain that during this same period the

Lapcourt schoolmaster was instructing the little villagers to

mind their language and not talk about all these things aloud.

But this was undoubtedly one of the conditions enabling the

institutions of knowledge and power to overlay this everyday

bit of theater with their solemn discourse. So it was that our

society-and it was doubtless the first in history to take such

measures-assembled around these timeless gestures, these

barely furtive pleasures between simple-minded adults and

alert children, a whole machinery for speechifying, analyzing,

and investigating.

Between the licentious Englishman, who earnestly recorded

for his own purposes the singular episodes of his

secret life, and his contemporary, this village halfwit who

would give a few pennies to the little girls for favors the older

ones refused him, there was without doubt a profound connection:

in any case, from one extreme to the other, sex

became something to say, and to say exhaustively in accordance

with deployments that were varied, but all, in their own

way, compelling. Whether in the form of a subtle confession

in confidence o􀑒 an authoritarian interrogation, sex-be it

refined or rustic-had to be put into words. A great polymorphous

injunction bound the Englishman and the poor Lorrainese

peasant alike. As history would have it, the latter was

named Jouy. \*

Since the eighteenth century, sex has not ceased to provoke

a kind of generalized discursive erethism. And these

discourses on sex did not multiply apart from or against

power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise.

Incitements to speak were orchestrated from all quarters,

"Jouy sounds like the past participle of jouir, the French verb meaning to enjoy,

to delight in (something), but also to have an orgasm, to come. (Translator's note)

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apparatuses everywhere for listening and recording, procedures

for observing, questioning, and formulating. Sex was

driven out of hiding and constrained to lead a discursive

existence. From the singular imperialism that compels everyone

to transform their sexuality into a perpetual discourse,

to the manifold mechanisms which, in the areas of economy,

pedagogy, medicine, and justice, incite, extract, distribute,

and institutionalize the sexual discourse, an immense verbosity

is what our civilization has required and organized.

Surely no other type of society has ever accumulated-and

in such a relatively short span of time-a similar quantity of

discourses concerned with sex. It may well be that we talk

about sex more than anything else; we set our minds to the

task; we convince ourselves that we have never said enough

on the subject, that, through inertia or submissiveness, we

conceal from ourselves the blinding evidence, and that what

is essential always eludes us, so that we must always start out

once again in search of it. It is possible that where sex is

concerned, the most long-winded, the most impatient of societies

is our own.

But as this first overview shows, we are dealing less with

a discourse on sex than with a multiplicity of discourses

produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different

institutions. The Middle Ages had organized around

the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance a discourse

that was markedly unitary. In the course of recent centuries,

this relative uniformity was broken apart, scattered, and

multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which

took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry,

psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism. More

precisely, the secure bond that held together the moral theology

of concupiscence and the obligation of confession (equivalent

to the theoretical discourse on sex and its first-person

formulation) was, if not broken, at least loosened and diversified:

between the objectification of sex in rational discourses,

and the movement by which each individual was set

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to the task of recounting his own sex, there has occurred,

since the eighteenth century, a whole series of tensions, conflicts,

efforts at adjustment, and attempts at retranscription.

So it is not simply in terms of a continual extension that we

must speak of this discursive growth; it should be seen rather

as a dispersion of centers from which discourses emanated,

a diversification of their forms, and the complex deployment

of the network connecting them. Rather than the uniform

concern to hide sex, rather than a general prudishness of

language, what distinguishes these last three centuries is the

variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for

speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing

it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and

tedistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole

network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into

discourse. Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with

the verbal proprieties imposed by the Age of Reason, what

was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement

to discourse.

The objection will doubtless be raised that if so many

stimulations and constraining mechanisms were necessary in

order to speak of sex, this was because there reigned over

everyone a certain fundamental prohibition; only definite

n􀑓essities-economic pressures, political requirementswere

able to lift this prohibition and open a few approaches

to the discourse on sex, but these were limited and carefully

coded; so much talk about sex, so many insistent devices

contrived for causing it to be talked about-but under strict

conditions: does this not prove that it was an object of secrecy,

and more important, that there is still an attempt to

keep it that way? But this often-stated theme, that sex is

outside of discourse and that only the removing of an obstacle;

the breaking of a secret, can clear the way leading to it,

is precisely what needs to be examined. Does it not partake

of the injunction by which discourse is provoked? Is it not

with the aim of inciting people to speak of sex that it is made

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to mirror, at the outer limit of every actual discourse, something

akin to a secret whose discovery is imperative, a thing

abusively reduced to silence, and at the same time difficult

and necessary, dangerous and precious to divulge? We must

not forget that by making sex into that which, above all else,

had to be confessed, the Christian pastoral always presented

it as the disquieting enigma: not a thing which stubbornly

shows itself, but one which always hides, the insidious presence

that speaks in a voice so muted and often disguised that

one risks remaining deaf to it. Doubtless the secret does not

reside In that basic reality in relation to which all the incitements

to speak of sex are situated-whether they try to force

the secret, or whether in some obscure way they reinforce it

by the manner in which they speak of it. It is a question

rather of a theme that forms part of the very mechanics of

these incitements: a way of giving shape to the requirement

to speak about the matter, a fable that is indispensable to the

endlessly proliferating economy of the discourse on sex.

What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they

consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated

themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it

as the secret.