

Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No. 21, pp. 262-266, June 2016

REVIEW

Mark G.E. Kelly, *Foucault's History of Sexuality Volume I; The Will to Knowledge* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), vi-ix, 1-150, ISBN 978-0-7486-4889-4.

Kelly's work is a commentary on Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*.¹ It begins with a brief presentation of its subject's "historical context" (a context limited to Foucault's life and writings) and concludes with a section on "study resources" (consisting of a glossary, suggestions for further reading and—a bit incongruously in a book on Foucault—advice for students on answering essay and exam questions). In between is an extended "guide to the text." This last is the heart of Kelly's study, and I shall focus on it in what follows.

The approach adopted in the guide is straightforward: Kelly proceeds through the *History of Sexuality* page by page—at points almost line by line (*K*, 62-64, 82-84)—sometimes restating Foucault's claims, sometimes clarifying and/or criticizing them. In addition he has frequent occasion to compare the English translation with the French original.²

There are advantages and disadvantages to Kelly's way of proceeding. On the positive side, it entails an emphasis on the details of Foucault's argument. It is thus a salutary alternative to the many works that employ his concepts but without the fine-grained analyses that give them meaning. Instances where Kelly's exacting method shows its value are not hard to find. Let me note one example from the beginning of the book. Foucault develops his own view using what he dubs the "repressive hypothesis" as a foil. The hypothesis holds that the period from the early seventeenth to the late nineteenth century exhibits a movement away from a "tolerant familiarity with the illicit" (*F*, 3) and toward ever greater censorship and restriction of sexuality. That narrative underwrites a political program of liberation from those fetters, a program that, it is claimed, has been partially realized in the twentieth century (see *F*, 115). Indeed, the primary measure and means of that realization is the articulation of the repressive hypothesis itself: If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that

¹ References to the work under review, abbreviated *K*, and to Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (translated by Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage Books, 1978]), abbreviated *F*, will be incorporated in the text.

² The work does not completely conform to that pattern. It also contains sections on criticisms of Foucault's theory of power (*K*, 73-4), recent attempts to develop his concept of "biopower" (*K*, 108-9) and appropriations of his work in feminism and queer theory (*K*, 120-128).

one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression (F, 6). Kelly's discussion is guided by a question that is surprisingly difficult to answer: "whose view it is that the repressive hypothesis actually represents?" (K, 24). He considers and rejects the most likely candidates: Reich, Marcuse and Deleuze and Guattari and then proposes that the repressive hypothesis is Foucault's own earlier view (K, 24 - 31).

Kelly's defense of his interpretation is deft, if not without its problems. In particular, the historical account that is central to the repressive hypothesis deserves greater care than he gives it. Kelly points to its absence in Deleuze and Guattari's work (K, 26) thus implying that it is present in Reich's and Marcuse's. But, in fact, that historical dimension is not found in their thought either.³ Though this means that Kelly is correct in holding that neither Reich nor Marcuse can be straightforwardly identified as proponents of the repressive hypothesis, it does not settle the matter since Foucault clearly thinks that each has an affinity with it. Kelly is aware of this—he points out that "Marcuse cannot represent the *full-blown* repressive hypothesis" (K, 25, emphasis mine) and might just as well have said the same of Reich—but his suggestion that Foucault is engaged primarily in self-criticism has the effect of underplaying its significance. That significance emerges later in *The History of Sexuality* where Reich and Marcuse are explicitly targeted as part of a general attack on the repressive hypothesis.⁴ And finally we come to Freud. Though not a defender of the repressive hypothesis, he is plainly its hero, which makes Foucault an even less likely proponent of that position than the other possibilities Kelly has considered and rejected.⁵ It also makes the peculiarity of Foucault's decision to express the repressive hypothesis as a *historical* thesis even more striking, for though one might turn to Freud for arguments in support of instinctual liberation one will find little in him to suggest that repression is a "historical fact" that takes root in the seventeenth century (F, 10).⁶ Though my discussion of Kelly's answer to the question of the "authorship" of the repressive hypothesis has been critical, there is no doubt that in probing the issue as he does, he clarifies its essential features and forces

³ On this point see Paul Robinson's venerable *The Freudian Left* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), which provides an excellent overview of Reich and Marcuse, one that speaks directly to the issues raised by Foucault's articulation of the repressive hypothesis.

⁴ Reich is mentioned by name (F, 131), Marcuse by reference to his concept of the "great refusal" (F, 96). Kelly discusses the first passage but not the second.

⁵ Kelly cites (K, 128n7) remarks Foucault makes in an interview, "The History of Sexuality," in Colin Gordon (ed.), C. Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (trans.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1980), 183, in support of his reading, but all Foucault says there is that he once accepted the understanding of power (as merely prohibiting) found in the repressive hypothesis. Moreover, in an interview concerned with *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault faults Marcuse and other "para-Marxists" for embracing that view of power ("Body/Power," in *Power/Knowledge*, 58-59).

⁶ Freud's 1908 paper "Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness" in James Strachey (trans., ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. IX (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), 181-204 is an intriguing exception to his customarily ahistorical treatment of repression. The historical periodization delineated in that paper and the biting criticisms of the restrictions that modern society places on sexuality overlap in an interesting way with Foucault's account of the repressive hypothesis.

us to think more deeply about the role it plays in Foucault's argument. I am certain that readers will find many other elements of Kelly's interpretation to be stimulating in just this way.

Above I noted that Kelly engages not just with Foucault's text but also with the translation of it. That engagement runs throughout the work and will be of great value to those who are reading the *History of Sexuality* in Hurley's English translation. The fruits of Kelly's comparison of translation and original can be grouped into four categories. First are the oversights that invariably creep in when translating a long and dense work. Though small, such glitches are sometimes significant. One in particular stands out: Foucault states that sexuality "has been expanding at an increasing rate since the eighteenth century," a development that Hurley places in the "seventeenth century" (*F*, 107; *K*, 79). Second are straightforward errors of translation. Thus, Hurley has Foucault drawing attention to the "pettiness" of the investigation of a 19th century case of pedophilia when in fact what the latter finds striking is its "miniscule character" [*caractère miniscule*] (*F*, 31; *K*, 36). Third are cases illustrating that the line between translation and interpretation is not a sharp one. For example, Hurley renders Foucault as follows, "The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasure" (*F*, 157). As Kelly points out, 'rallying point' is perfectly acceptable as a translation of '*point d'appui*'. However, as he also notes, its military meaning (as a staging area) is apt to be drowned out by the political connotations of 'rally', thus misleadingly suggesting that Foucault is encouraging us to embrace "bodies and pleasure" so as to dethrone sexuality (*K*, 116-118). Fourth is a case where Hurley engages in a practice that is all too common amongst translators: using multiple words to render a technical term—in this case, '*dispositif*'. Foucault does not explicitly define that crucial expression, and thus the reader must infer its meaning from the way it is used. That is not easy to do when it is translated variously as 'apparatus', 'deployment', 'device' and 'machinery' (*K* 133). Of necessity I have dwelt here on those instances where Kelly corrects, qualifies and improves upon Hurley. This is not to suggest, however, that he is intent on showing the English translation to have been badly done. To the contrary, his commentary is designed as a supplement rather than an indictment; and, as I hope to have shown, it serves that purpose admirably.

The hazard inherent in the commentary form is that the author focuses too intently on the parts, thus neglecting the whole. The *History of Sexuality* needs that broad perspective because its argument proceeds along three apparently heterogeneous tracks. The first is the development of "sexuality" out of the confessional practices of medieval Christianity, a development that finds its culmination in the medicalized *scientia sexualis* of the 19th century (*F*, 68; see also *F*, 105). The second is the articulation of a series of theses concerning power (*F*, 92-102). For present purposes, of particular importance are Foucault's claims that power is productive, not merely repressive, and that it traverses the social body as a whole rather than being exercised from a single point. The third is the emergence in the 17th century of "biopower":

This power over life evolved in two basic forms [...] the first [...] centered on the body as a machine, its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the

parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines*. The second [...] focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*. (F, 139; emphasis in original.)⁷

The crucial question is how these three tracks fit together. This is not the place for a full statement of the puzzle, much less a solution to it. Nevertheless, I hope the following will indicate where the difficulties lie: The first two tracks might be taken to describe a historical process that leads to the formation of subjects whose essence is their sexuality, an essence that they believe can be liberated only by discovering and expressing the truth about it. The point of Foucault's analysis is to expose the falsity of that belief and thus undermine the strategy based on it. Reasonable though that reading is, it runs into trouble when juxtaposed with Foucault's analysis of biopower.⁸ For sexuality seems to require just the sort of emphasis on the subject's inner-life that the disciplines and biopolitics do not.⁹ Thus it is unclear how the first can provide the matrix for the joining of the other two, as Foucault claims it does (F, 140). And there is another, related difficulty: The target of Foucault's analysis of the history of sexuality is psychoanalysis. Biopower appears to be offered up, however, as an alternative to Marxism (see F, 140-141). We thus face the question of how to integrate those two polemics.¹⁰

These issues of coherence are central to understanding and assessing the *History of Sexuality*. In following Foucault's text as scrupulously as he does, Kelly does not attain the distance that is necessary to pursue them with the vigor they demand. With that said, it should be stressed that Foucault is not forthcoming on the matters I have been pressing and that the volumes in which they might have been more fully addressed were never written. Thus, the incomplete character of Kelly's commentary mirrors that of its subject. In that respect, as in the others I have highlighted, it is most illuminating.

⁷ F,140 makes clear that biopolitics is an element of biopower, not identical to it.

⁸ To see that the reading *is* reasonable consider Foucault's discussion of subjectivity (F, 60) in conjunction with his critical remarks on sexual liberation (F, 157-159).

⁹ As Foucault puts it elsewhere, "What I want to show [in the *History of Sexuality*] is how power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending even on the mediation of the subject's own representations. If power takes hold on the body, this isn't through its having first to be interiorised in people's consciousnesses," ("The History of Sexuality," 186). His remarks downplaying the significance of ideology as compared to the sort of analysis just described ("Body/Power, 58) are also worth considering in this connection.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis, which is usually directed against psychoanalysis, at times reads more as an attack on Marxism; see F, 36-37 and 120 as well as the interviews cited in footnote 5 and footnote 9. Thus, identifying the "author" of the repressive hypothesis turns out to be an even more complicated issue than I suggested at the beginning of this review.

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