Foucault and the History of Homosexuality: a Properly Historical Consideration

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This year marks twentieth anniversary of the publication of Michel Foucault’s *La volonté de savoir* and the fifteenth anniversary of the paperback edition of Robert Hurley’s English translation *The History of Sexuality Volume 1 An Introduction*. Ever since its publication, this work and its author have been at the centre of controversy and debate. Critical acclaim has competed with contemptuous dismissal for the last word, while those who have found insights therein have continued to pour out monographs and articles. More and longer, perhaps, than any of that 1970s cluster of new French theorists usually known as poststructuralists, Foucault has been a presence in the study of sexuality and even his sternest critics are unlikely to deny the impact of his work.

The *History of Sexuality* now consists of three volumes (after an eight year hiatus, the *Introduction* was finally supplemented by second and third volumes dealing with the ancient Mediterranean world)¹ and it may seem, then, somewhat odd that one would want to concentrate upon the first volume, the *Introduction*, only. Equally, my focus upon the relevance of this volume to the study of the history of homosexuality alone may also need explanation. There are a number of reasons for these decisions. Firstly, Foucault’s publishing life stretched over many years and his interests stretched widely; across madness, medicine, the human sciences, sexuality and the prison. More important still, his intellectual approaches varied greatly over the course of the years, a range of approaches variously described but usually identified as involving phenomenological, archaeological and genealogical phases. These facts confronts all of those who wished to use Foucault’s work with a problem: whether to deal with his work and thought as a whole or whether to simply take up those elements which they feel are useful. Primarily, of course, this decision will be influenced by whether or not one believes that there is an internal consistency to the work as a whole. Some have argued for a clear line of argument stretching across the years, conceding, at most, shifts of emphasis. McHoul and Grace, for example, describe his perfectly unambiguous (and orthodox structuralist) dismissal of the subject in *The Order of Things* (1966) as having been ‘sometimes read in [an] unfortunate way’ - they are keen that his remarks upon the ‘death of


man' should be read as meaning something other than what they do in fact say. Others have seen his epistemological leaps as involving a denial of all that has been said before but prefer to draw the line, to ignore them as failures of nerve on Foucault's part or as retreats from the real Foucauldian project. The simplest way, however, of dealing with the undeniable inconsistencies in his work is probably to take at face value Foucault's own rather lyrical acknowledgment that he changed his mind from time to time. This is particularly important when we come to consider the History of Sexuality as a whole because nowhere in his work is his change of mind more noticeable, or more sharply delineated, than in the midst of this multi-volume project. The argument in Volumes Two and Three dealing with the ancient Mediterranean world relies upon a startling return of the very subject which had been so firmly absent from the Introduction, which was written fully in keeping with Foucault's 1966 announcement in The Order of Things of the death of man. The Introduction is best, therefore, treated on its own terms.

Furthermore, by concentrating on one aspect of the one work it will be possible to narrow what is necessarily a wide-ranging debate to a manageable realm. Other reasons which support this position are the long break between the appearance of the Introduction and Volumes Two and Three meant that the influence of the Introduction was well advanced before the subsequent volumes appeared and that the later volumes do not touch upon the focus of this piece: modern homosexuality. This article proposes to consider Foucault's thesis in relation to the emergence of modern homosexuality as it is embodied in the first volume of the History of Sexuality.

One of Foucault's central concerns in the Introduction is with the question of

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3 See, for example, Wickham's response to the appearance of Volumes 2 and 3 of the History of Sexuality: 'Here, the idea of individuals as entities which pre-exist power relations seems to be somewhat resuscitated as Foucault discusses 'techniques of governing the self' which are adopted by individuals and which form the basis of sexuality. Faced with suggestions like these from Foucault we can do one of two things. We can dump everything Foucault has previously said about subjects and return easily to the notion of individuals as unproblematic foci of political action. Or, alternatively, we can concentrate on the 'techniques' aspect of his formulation, assume that individuals are a separate set of techniques from those of the self, not pre-existing entities' Gary Wickham, 'Foucault, Power, Left Politics', Arena 78, 1987, p. 149.
4 'As to those for whom to work hard, to begin and begin again, to attempt and be mistaken, to go back and rework everything from top to bottom, and still find reason to hesitate from one step to the next - as to those, in short, for whom to work in the midst of uncertainty and apprehension is tantamount to failure, all I can say is that clearly we are not from the same planet'. Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, p. 7.
whether sexuality had really been subject to a new repressive attention by powerful social forces during the period from the late seventeenth century through to the mid twentieth (that silencing regime that we usually call Victorian). He identifies three ways of treating this problem:

(a) as 'a properly historical question' concerned with whether a new era of sexual repression had really opened in Europe in the seventeenth century;
(b) as a 'historico-theoretical question', concerned with whether or not power really works in our society primarily by means of repression; and
(c) a 'historico-political question', concerned with whether the political critique of repression that operates in the late twentieth century is merely part of the thing that it denounces (that is, part of the deployment of sexuality by power).5

In relation to the specific sub-theme of his work that will be the main concern of this paper, the origins of modern homosexuality, Foucault's thoughts range across all three of these areas, but it is primarily as a properly historical question that will be considered the hypothesis of the Introduction. That is: to what extent is Foucault's theory of the origin of the modern homosexual 'truly an established historical fact' (to use his own words)?6 and does what we know about the past confirm or refute his theory? In doing this, however, the period of attention will be extended somewhat from the seventeenth century so as to draw upon some of the important scholarly work published in the field gay history in recent years, work which can help us assess Foucault's historical claims.

This paper relies upon Foucault's notion of a 'properly historical question' in order to draw attention to the fact that Foucault, unlike many who have come after, does not argue that the objects of historical inquiry are constructed by the historian's discourse. For Foucault, while sexuality may be a product of nineteenth century discourses (medical, legal etc.), it is, for those of us looking back at the past, as it was for those living in it, a real historical fact. This marks him off from many of those postmodernists with whom he is often grouped. He is clearly at odds with that stream of postmodernism which includes figures such as Derrida, which believes that there is no 'outside-the-text'; and it is doubtful, for example, that he would go even so far as Joan Scott who criticises historians who have depicted themselves as documenting reality rather than helping to construct it.7 The central difference between these schools of thought is that, for Foucault, discourse is not the basic fact, not the constitutive centre. This role is taken, rather, by power. Power, manifested in a will to knowledge, makes discourses possible; discourses merely

5 Foucault, Introduction, p. 10.
6 Loc. cit.
support power relations. The central question for Foucault is always:

what were the most immediate, the most local power relations at work? How did they make possible these kinds of discourses, and conversely, how were these discourses used to support power relations.  

Foucault himself acknowledged the presence of historical method in his work in the following terms:

The problem of the truth of what I say is very difficult for me, and it’s also the central problem. It’s essentially the question which up to now I have never answered.

In the course of my works, I utilize methods that are part of the classic repertory: demonstration, proof by means of historical documentation, quoting other texts, referral to authoritative comments, the relationship between ideas and facts, the proposal of explanatory patterns, etc. There’s nothing original in that. From this point of view, whatever I assert in my writing can be verified or refuted as in any other history book.  

It is legitimate, then, to subject Foucault’s history to the scrutiny of historiographical norms, in a way that it would not be legitimate to so subject the contribution of Derrida.

On the face of it, Foucault’s influence upon historians is surprising. The Introduction is, after all, very bad history indeed. Bob Connell has identified the most obvious criticisms: there is little or no evidence for many of Foucault’s claims, there is an over-generalisation from evidence he relies upon, there is an over reliance on the French experience for what he claims is a Europe-wide phenomenon, there is a startling indifference to issues of gender and that Foucault’s model of medieval sexuality is too one-dimensional. Even David Halperin who subscribes to Foucault’s theory and applies it to the study of the ancient world, responded to its appearance with the view that:

Volume One, for all its admittedly bright ideas, is dogmatic, tediously repetitious, full of hollow assertions, disdainful of historical documentation, and careless in its generalisations: it distributes over a period spanning from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries a gradual process of change well

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8 Foucault, Introduction, p. 97.
known to Foucault only in its later mid-nineteenth century manifestations.¹¹

The question of why Foucault has been so influential among historians despite his poor method is outside the scope of this article but it is important to note that his inadequacies have not gone unnoticed or unchallenged.¹²

Before we turn our attention to evaluating Foucault’s Introduction we need to look at just what his thesis is. This is particularly important because of the way his ideas have permeated academic thought, in such a way and to such an extent that his actual work is often overlooked. In the Introduction Foucault poses the idea that sexuality is not a biological fact but a discursive one; that is, that it exists not in the body but in society; that it is not an element of human biology but is an effect of discourses - specific mechanisms of knowledge and power about sex.¹³ At the end of the eighteenth century, he argues (and for reasons about which he expresses ignorance) that a new technology of sex emerged; one in which pedagogy, medicine and economics brought sex into the secular sphere and under the sway of the state.¹⁴ This process takes place in three stages: the late eighteenth century discovery of birth control, the 1830s’ use of the family as an instrument of economic and political control and the late nineteenth century’s ‘juridical and medical control of the perversions for the sake of a general protection of the society and the race’. It is at this latest point in time, he says, that ‘the deployment of sexuality spread through the entire social body’.¹⁵

In this theory, pre-modern ‘sodomy’ (a category of forbidden acts) becomes ‘homosexuality ... a psychological, psychiatric, medical category’¹⁶ and the homosexual himself (always, for Foucault, ‘himself’) comes into existence. In his now famous description, Foucault identifies this new entity as ‘a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and

¹¹ This 1986 comment appears in David Halperin, Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Historiography, New York 1995, p. 5. Halperin remarks, however, that he would no longer write such a sentence. The reasons for this change of attitude seem to relate to his adoption of Foucault’s shift in focus from politics to ethics (ibid., p. 68).
¹² There is an interesting discussion of the extent to, and ways in, which historians (and others) have responded to Foucault’s work in Allan Magill, ‘The Reception of Foucault by Historians’, Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 48, No. 1, January - March 1987, pp. 117-142.
¹³ Foucault, Introduction, pp. 103-105.
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 116.
¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 121-122.
¹⁶ Ibid., p. 43. The discourses are not only medical. In relation to sexuality Foucault asserts that ‘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’. and notes specifically ‘demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism’. Ibid., pp. 33-34. His discussion of homosexuality, however, is couched almost entirely in terms of the medical model.
a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology’, that is, an object of inquiry constructed by and within discourses. This not a development confined uniquely to homosexuality. Alongside this homosexual were a ‘thousand aberrant sexualities ... zoophiles and zoocasts, auto-monosexualists, mixoscopophiles, gynecomasts, presbyophiles, sexoesthetic inverts, dyspareunist women ... ’ What we have in these perversions is ‘an encroachment of a type of power on bodies and their pleasures’, a ‘proliferation of sexualities through the extension of power’.

But power does not have it all its own way. ’Where there is power,’ he tells us, ’there is resistance’. Or rather, a multiplicity of points of resistance, ’a plurality of resistances, each a special case’, distributed irregularly in time and space and with varying intensities. But resistance remains trapped within the mesh of power, within even the particular discourse against which it purports to struggle.

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and sub-species of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and ’psychic hermaphroditism’ made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ’perversity’. The appearance of these discourses also made possible the formation of a ’reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ’naturality’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.

This, then, is Foucault’s case: that homosexuality as we understand and experience it is a phenomenon originating in the late nineteenth century, that it socially constructed rather than inherent in bodies, that it is constructed by power within discourses rather than materially, and that the medical discourse is of primary importance to this process.

In order to evaluate this thesis three moments in the history of homosexuality will be considered: the repression of the early modern period in northern Europe, the development of the medical model in the late nineteenth century and the homosexual subculture of early to mid twentieth century New York. In each of these cases the specific weaknesses of Foucault’s method would, if applied, seriously distort our understanding.

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17 Ibid., p. 43.
18 Ibid., pp. 43-44.
19 Ibid., p. 48.
20 Ibid., p. 95.
21 Ibid., p. 96.
22 Ibid., p. 101.
The absence of repression in Foucault’s account of the origins of the modern homosexual was perhaps the element which most surprised early readers of his account. Until then gay activists and such academics and historians who had turned their minds to gay studies had tended to emphasise the repression of homosexuality by the state and by corporate entities such as the churches and employers. The issue is partly a matter of nomenclature, for Foucault does not deny the role of repression against homosexuals. What he is arguing against is the widely held analysis that the repression of homosexuality (and indeed sexuality in general) had a systemic function, that it was an effect of policies and practices designed to subordinate sexuality to the needs of capitalist accumulation. The theory against which he is working, generally described as Freudo-Marxism, asserted that the repression of homosexual desire was bound up with and depended upon the existence of an unjust social order in that the survival of capitalism was aided by the oppression of women and gays.²³

Formally, at least, Foucault’s attitude to the repression hypothesis is somewhat indecisive. Certainly he never unambiguously rejects it. At one point he says that ‘the hypothesis of a power of repression exerted by our society on sex for economic reasons appears to be quite inadequate’;²⁴ hardly a crushing refutation. Later he is equally coy. Responding to the argument that all this ordering of sexuality is intended ‘to ensure population, to reproduce labour capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative’ he announces that: ‘I still do not know whether this was the ultimate objective’.²⁵

The most reasonable approach is to assume, not that Foucault denies the silencing, the prohibition and the dissemination of false ideas that goes on around sexual expression, but rather that he sets these aside in order to concentrate upon the discursive production and propagation of knowledge.²⁶ In doing so, however, he undercuts our ability to understand the events of that era in which homosexuality in its modern form truly began to emerge - the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This period saw a remarkable upsurge in state-sponsored anti-homosexual violence in the more advanced parts of Europe, especially in the Netherlands and England. A virtual witchhunt swept through the Netherlands in 1730 and up to 100 men were executed and many more men and women were sentenced to long prison terms for sodomy, cross-dressing and masturbation. Further waves of persecution took place in that country in 1764-65 and 1776-79.²⁷ Somewhat later, while many

²⁴ Foucault, Introduction, p. 72, emphasis added.
²⁵ Ibid., pp. 36-37.
²⁶ Ibid., p. 12.
governments, under the influence of the Enlightenment were carrying out legal
reform in the late 1700s (primarily in the form of the abolition of the death penalty
but in the case of the revolutionary regime in France in 1791 abolishing the crime
entirely), in Britain, fear of revolution (external and internal) contributed to a
marked increase in homosexual repression from the 1780s to the 1830s.28

A rigorously Foucauldian theory would see the legal discourses of the period (laws
and regulations, judicial and policing practices and so on) as constituting the (legal)
homosexual subject, reflecting the way in which, for Foucault, power, via the
mechanism of discourses, constitutes the objects of its attention. Now, it may well
be that there is a change in the way the law saw homosexuality in this period and
that the legal homosexual subject was somewhat different to the earlier
moral/theological subject. It may even be that these periods of repression
contributed to the way in which homosexuals saw themselves. But the fact is that
this repression was, in the first instance, directed against something, and specifically
against a pre-existing, self-created homosexual sub-culture.

The origins of the homosexual sub-culture can be traced in Europe's major cities
back at least to the seventeenth century and it is important to recognise that
homosexuals themselves stood at the very heart of the process of creation of
modern homosexuality. Long before Westphal (whose work of 1870 on 'contrary
sexual sensations' stands for Foucault as the moment of constitution of
homosexuality as 'a psychological, psychiatric, medical category')29, homosexuals
had been busily creating a life for themselves which in the larger cities of Europe
and North America had taken on the form of a sub-culture; a sub-culture that in
London and the cities of the Netherlands was in full flower as early as the 1720s.
Norton's work on London describes a subculture (the denizens of which referred to
themselves by a number of names including 'mollys')30, marked by the
development of exclusive social gatherings, its own communication networks, a
specialised vocabulary or slang, a degree of self-identification by its members,
distinctive and common patterns of behaviour and a shared sympathy in the face of
social ostracism.31 The Netherlands experienced a similar development at the same
time, as did Paris.32 In North America, molly houses can be identified by about the

29 Foucault, Introduction, p. 43.
31 Ibid., p. 9.
32 Michael Rey, 'Parisian Homosexuals Create a Lifestyle, 1700 - 1750: The Police Archives' in
Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson, (eds), History of Homosexuality in Europe and North
1860s. The inhabitants of this subculture are often shadowy figures but it is clear from the work that has been done that as social types they stood somewhere between the medieval sodomite and the truly modern homosexual, sharing with the latter a desire for sexual and social contact with their own kind and at least some degree of identification with others of a similar sexual preference. Homosexuality as an identity, then, has a history and its origins considerably predate Foucault’s medical model; it predates even the word we currently use to identify it. Homosexuals, like E. P. Thompson’s working class, are present at their own making.

Nor was this sub-culture confined to bars and beats. It continued to grow and to spread its influence over the course of the nineteenth century. Michael Ryan suggests that most of the late nineteenth discourses about homosexuality are a response to the emergence of homosexuals themselves within cultural movements such as Romanticism, the Pre-Raphaelites and Decadence. In this proposal homosexuals began to assume discursive positions and to enter into discourses which had hitherto denied their existence. As he says: 'If they [homosexuals] were discovered at this point, it was because the closet doors had been prised open - not by the scientific agents of power but by homosexuals themselves'. We can see this process at work in rather more detail in Fone’s survey of representations of homosexuality and homophobia in English and North American literature between 1750 and 1969, a discussion which emphasises the way in which homosexual writers constructed themselves within literature. Fone is alert, however, to the worldly realities of texts, dealing with issues such as whether literary texts are widely or narrowly circulated, surely a fact of some significance if these discourses are meant to be having an effect in the world, in a way that Foucault simply does not with his medical texts.

What weight we should place upon the emergence and spread of the subculture relative to the appearance of homosexuality within the cultural movements is, of course, open to debate, but the point remains: it is the response of the authorities (legal, literary, medical) to the activities of human beings (as individual and collective subjects) which explains the coming into existence of ideas in the world, rather than power which summons objects of inquiry into being. The real,
historical and material existence of homosexuals explains the possibility of the category homosexual.

By paying attention to the extra-discursive reality of a homosexual sub-culture we can explain something which Foucault, remarkably, overlooks: the problem of what happened to the 'thousand aberrant sexualities' that medical discourse constructed at the end of the nineteenth century. Where today are the zoophiles and zooerasts, auto-monosexualists, mixoscopophiles, gynecomasts, presbyphiles, sexoesthetic inverts, dyspareunist women? How many of these aberrant sexualities do we recognise? The point is that for Foucault, discourse summons sexual categories and personalities into existence. If this is so, why is it that, of the 'thousand sexualities', only homosexuality remains a real, active category? The answer is rather simple: homosexuality exists today, as it existed in the mid nineteenth century, not because the medical profession (or any other discourse) says that it does, but because it is a real, existing social (and, in certain historical periods, political) fact.

Foucault's great mistake is that, trapped within discourse, he is unable to distinguish between discourses which are attached to real entities, and those which operate simply within the realm of ideas. This is an example of what the realist philosopher Roy Bhaskar has called the 'epistemic fallacy', the failure to distinguish between our knowledge of an object, and the object itself. In relation to Foucault's views on nineteenth century homosexuality the point is that the (legal, literary, medical) discourses about homosexuality are not the same as the real structures of life and thought which composed the homosexual sub-culture. Nor do they constitute this sub-culture. On the contrary, the sub-culture is prior to these discourses, both in the sense that it predates them and in the sense that it is an essential part of the constitution of those discourses. While the sub-culture's process of change and development is influenced, among other things, by the prevailing stock of discourses socially, historically and geographically available to those within it, the sub-culture is the object to which legal, literary and medical authorities address their attention and while their knowledge is only ever more or less accurate, it is always to some extent referring to and constrained by that reality.

If we turn our attention to Foucault's ideas regarding the nature of the medical model of homosexuality we see a somewhat different problem resulting from the fact that Foucault does very little analysis of the medical discourse to which he draws attention. As a result, he overlooks the important debates within this discourse; debates which were resolved not by the logic of the discourse (for there is no single logic, as he himself acknowledges) but by the relative weight of various

or elicit power'. Ryan, 'Foucault's Fallacy', p. 132.
extra-discursive forces.

Sexology\(^{38}\) was a deeply divided discipline and could be, and was, mobilised towards quite different political and social ends. While most sexologists were in favour of, and spoke out for, the decriminalisation of homosexual acts,\(^{39}\) they were remarkably unsuccessful in their efforts. Indeed, they were least successful in this in exactly those countries where their views were strongest and most influential (England and Germany); a fact which draws our attention to the relative social power of these professions and their discourses. These demands, however, were not always an argument for social tolerance. Westphal, for instance, saw law reform as necessary precisely in order to encourage inverts to present themselves to doctors for study and help.\(^{40}\)

But there were those for whom the medical model of homosexuality provided a basis for pleas for a broader social toleration including activists such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter.\(^{41}\) The most prominent of these was Carpenter who put homogenic love or companion-love on a par with both maternal love and marriage between men and women. He argued that science showed that there was no significant difference between inverts and normal people (other than a general tendency towards gender inversion)\(^{42}\) and that society’s contempt was probably a result of the idea that the only appropriate role for sex is procreation. Carpenter’s enthusiasm for homogenic love (as opposed to a toleration of it) represented the most radical use of sexology. It is in Carpenter that we find, I suspect, the source for Ellis’ comment that ‘some few assert [that inversion is] a beneficial variety of human emotion which should be tolerated or even fostered’!\(^{43}\)

For Carpenter, comrade-love is a ‘bond which by the most passionate and lasting compulsion may draw members of the different classes together … [and] may as Whitman says, have ‘deepest relations to general politics’.\(^{44}\) And not just for men:

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38 Sexology is the name given at the time and in most recent (English-language) writing upon medicalised research into the field of sexuality.
40 Kennedy, *Ulrichs*, p. 130.
42 Carpenter, *Homogenic Love*, pp. 11-12.
... has been accompanied by a marked development of the homogenic passion among the female sex. ... [A] growing consciousness among women that they have been oppressed and unfairly treated by men and a growing unwillingness to ally themselves unequally in marriage ... has caused the womankind to draw more closely together ... into comrade-alliances - and of a quite passionate kind. 

These comments are in keeping with his general liberationist approach to social relations, reflected in his calls for the 'free woman' to 'insist upon her right to speak, dress, think, act and above all use her sex, as she deems best' Ultimately, Carpenter uses sexology to envisage the transcendence of gender in the 'evolution of a higher type of humanity of such a nature as to include male and female characteristics' and for all his weaknesses, his elitism and his confusion on gender in particular, he embodies better than most the radical potential of medicalised sexology.

In the end, however, it was not the radical vision that could be drawn from sexology that prevailed, the tolerance that Radcliffe Hall pleaded for in *The Well of Loneliness*, or even the decriminalisation that most of the sexologists supported. Rather, the outcome was what Mary McIntosh very much later identified as the 'homosexual role', a 'specialised, despised and punished role' with a conservative social function.

The triumph of this conservative reading of sexology's attitude to homosexuality can only be understood as the outcome of a broader social and political struggle over the control of sexuality. The move of sexuality into the secular sphere, which Foucault acknowledges but is unable to explain, owes much to the rise of an industrial society. Industrialisation and urbanisation had led to a breakdown of local forms of community governance such as the parish, thereby undermining the prevailing means of social control. This in turn generated a demand in powerful circles for central government control over morality. In late nineteenth century

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47 Cited in Rowbotham, 'Edward Carpenter', p. 111.
48 Rowbotham, 'Edward Carpenter', p. 112.
51 McIntosh, 'The Homosexual Role', pp. 27-28.
Britain and Germany, where most of the intellectual work involved in the construction of the modern homosexuality took place, this took on an added urgency when imperialist competition led to the fear that national power was being undermined by a lack of virile, healthy males. The causes were recognised as being complex and the response was multi-faceted but part of it was a mobilisation of state and social power around the strengthening of the family as the focus of social and personal fulfilment which:

attempted to define out of existence such people as the unrepentant prostitute or single mother, the woman who cohabited with more than one man, the consenting fourteen- and fifteen-year old couples whose existence had horrified Shaftesbury, and the youth whose preferred sexual practice was picking up toffs in London’s West End.

In all of this the categorisation of homosexual desire was only one target. In Britain, this struggle included social movements such as the feminist purity campaigns, and legislative intervention through the *Contagious Diseases Act* and the *Criminal Law Amendment Act* (in which the anti-homosexual Labouchere Amendment was very much a minor, incidental and uncontroversial clause).

Foucault’s indifference to the extra-discursive elements of the history of homosexuality and to the play of social power upon the range of available readings of any discourse is a very great weakness in his work. It is clear that this turn of the century conservative triumph blocked a radical, and even liberal potential of sexology and that sexology’s incorporation into conservative mainstream ideology was not the unfolding of any single logic of sexology but a victory for one reading out of the many that were possible. None of this is considered within Foucault’s *Introduction* and it is not clear that it can be satisfactorily accounted for by the model therein.

Equally striking is the absence of that most crucial element of any historical study - an attention to the big picture. Foucault is right, as is now generally recognised, to identify the development of a medicalised discourse about homosexuality and to locate it within the late nineteenth century. He is wrong to assume (and it is only an assumption) that it was having any impact upon the wider society at that time. Historical research is starting to uncover the reality of homosexual life in twentieth century Western societies and here the medical model of homosexuality is more remarkable for its absence, at best marginal role, than for its hegemonic presence.

Foucault acknowledges that there is a distinction between the discursive production

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54 Carlin, 'The Roots of Gay Oppression', p. 95.
of the techniques of sex and sexuality and their spread outwards from the bourgeois hegemonic centre to the proletariat but it is only in recent years that we have begun to see just how and when this spread began to take to take place. It is certainly not the case that the medical model comes into play in the late nineteenth century and summons into being a new sort of homosexual. The strongest evidence for this is George Chauncey’s new history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century homosexual sub-culture in New York. Based on a careful reading of a wide range of sources, Chauncey shows that while Foucault’s medicalised homosexual identity was firmly established within the medical profession by the late nineteenth century, the fact is that it was barely noticed outside the profession until well into the twentieth century and was certainly not the dominant self-interpretation for most of those who engaged in homosexual activity. Chauncey’s New York is inhabited not by heterosexuals and homosexuals but by fairies and wolves and pansies and queers and husbands and punks, socio-sexual categories that owe virtually nothing to the medical model, or indeed to any of the other elite discourses of the time such as religion or the law.

These categories remained dominant until sometime after the 1930s and although this is the point at which Chauncey’s work stops (a second volume is promised), it seems clear that the medicalised homosexual identity upon which Foucault focuses so much attention owes its rise to prominence less to the coming into existence of a particular discourse and more to the defeat, at the hands of the state, of New York’s homosexual sub-cultures in the 1930s. Chauncey details the exclusion of homosexuality from the public sphere by means of police raids, media panics and the strict regulation of entertainment venues, campaigns which involved ideological mobilisation/discourse construction but which was decided by rather more basic relations of force. This defeat and marginalisation cleared the ground for a new medicalised model of homosexuality to be adopted both by powerful elites and by same-sexually active people.

And even then, while the medical model did finally permeate society (though not to anything like the extent that Foucault believes), it was never uncontested. While religious and legal conceptions of homosexuality had certainly been strongly coloured by the medical model and its understandings, they nonetheless remained impervious for a considerable period to much of its logic. Twentieth century public policy in relation to homosexuality always involved a juggling of these competing notions.

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55 Foucault, Introduction, pp. 119, 127.
57 Ibid., Ch. 12.
If the medical model was not uncontested in society as a whole, this was even more the case among homosexuals themselves. It is likely to be true that over the course of the twentieth century more and more homosexuals came to think of themselves as a particular kind of person, defined by their sexuality (and in that sense Foucault’s notion that sexuality had become the truth about us is an interesting insight), but it is equally true that for a very long time very large numbers of men and women remained outside the embrace of this idea, living their lives and seeing themselves and their sexual practices in ways quite different to those proposed by the medical model. Even in the USA in the 1950s, at the height of the dominance of the medical model, Evelyn Hooker’s research with homosexuals who were not prisoners or medical patients revealed that many homosexuals were well informed about medical research and theorising but dismissed its accuracy or relevance.\(^58\)

In the case of Australia, it is clear from the work of Lucy Chesser and Ruth Ford that these medicalised notions did not come to prominence outside the medical profession until the 1950s and even after that very many lesbians lived their lives indifferent to, often indeed in ignorance of the officially sanctioned discourses of perversion.\(^59\)

It is clear, then, that in his claim that modern homosexuality is a product of the late nineteenth century medical science, Foucault locates this process both too late (missing the rise of urban molly subcultures) and too early (overlooking the very late and very imperfect implantation of medicalised notions within society) and while he is right to draw attention the way in which the category ‘homosexual’ is a social, rather than a biological one, his emphasis on discourses leads him to overlook the role of powerful forces in determining the rise and fall of the various ‘regimes of truth’ attached to homosexuality.

These errors owe much to Foucault’s emphasis on elite theorising and professionalised discourses and his indifference to real people and their everyday lives. His bracketing of the notions of the subject and of human agency (indeed his active dismissal of the idea in his ‘death of man’ remarks) and his reduction of subjectivity to an effect of discourse, makes this inevitable. At the very heart of the Introduction’s weaknesses from the historian’s point of view is the absence of the active subject, the subject which both constructs and is constructed by the world. Similarly, his genealogies, whereby the discourses of the present are simply traced back into the past to their point of origin are much less useful than historical studies


which explore the outcomes of struggles between forces mobilised by more or less powerful subjects. We search in vain in Foucault for any explanation (even in discourse theory’s own terms), or even for any guidance on from where different and competing discourses come, why some discourses are dominant and others are not and why the relationship between dominant and subordinate discourses changes (even reverses) over time. In the end, the history of homosexuality, and the study of that history, can gain little from *The History of Sexuality* and further will need to take place decisively outside that particular text.

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