

The Gay Science

Michel Foucault

Translated by Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith

JEAN LE BITOUX: What is the reason that, of all your books, this first volume of *The History of Sexuality* is the one you think has been most misunderstood?

MICHEL FOUCAULT: (*long silence*) It's hard to say whether a book has been understood or misunderstood. Because, after all, perhaps the person who wrote the book is the one who misunderstood it. Because the reader would not be the one who understood or misunderstood it. I don't think an author should lay down the law about his own book. I'd say I was surprised, in any case, by the way it was received by some readers. For it seemed to me that we'd reached a situation where it was possible to take up again some of these overused, overdetermined, and worn-out notions—for example, repression—and that we needed to see what this meant and, above all, to see how they could be made to function now, in a new situation, and within a battle [*combat*] or debate whose form has nonetheless changed in the last twenty years.

I think things have settled down now, and this first impression of—how should I put it?—surprise has now been annulled. That being said, the impression of surprise was perhaps linked to the sim-

The appearance of this interview in English would not have been possible without the generous efforts of Jean Le Bitoux, Arnold Davidson, and David Halperin. Sadly, Jean Le Bitoux passed away in April 2010, and we would like to dedicate this translation to him.

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plicity of my previous positions (*laughs*) and to the fact that it was not difficult to associate me with a rather “Boy Scout” conception of the struggle against all forms of repression, whatever and wherever they may be. On this, I think there had been a kind of small effect of “shifting” [*bougé*], if you will, with regard to the positions that were attributed to me, or which were those of others.

LE BITOUX: Some homosexual militants would take this to be a total critique of the necessity of a struggle for homosexuality. What do you think about this type of struggle? And in your work, once you begin to critique the word *homosexuality* and its social connotations, isn't there a destruction of this type of sectorial struggle?

FOUCAULT: OK, here, I think we need to be very precise. The notion of *homosexuality* is a notion that dates from the nineteenth century, and thus it's very recent. And I think it's not simply the notion that's recent. I'd say that the separating out from all sexual practices, from all forms of pleasure, from all the kinds of relationships people can have with each other—the separating out of the homosexual dates, in part, from this period. For example, in the eighteenth century, and

MICHEL FOUCAULT (1926–1984) held the chair in the History of Systems of Thought at the Collège de France. JEAN LE BITOUX (1948–2010) was a French journalist and a fervent activist for gay rights in France. He was the founder of F HAR (Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire) and a cofounder of the monthly magazine *Le Gai Pied* (1979). He authored four books about (his) homosexuality and about gay resistance against Nazi deportations during World War II: *Moi, Pierre Seel, déporté homosexuel* (with Pierre Seel, 1994); *Les Oubliés de la mémoire* (2002); *Citoyen de seconde zone* (with Hervé Chevaux and Bruno Proth, 2003); and *Entretiens sur la question gay* (2005). The interview he recorded with Michel Foucault in July 1978 was one of the first occasions in which Foucault talked publicly about his homosexuality. NICOLAE MORAR is a PhD candidate in the Department of Philosophy at Purdue University, where he founded the Bioethics Lecture Series and is completing a thesis analyzing the ways in which current biotechnologies are altering traditional conceptions of human nature. He is currently coediting a book (with V. Cisney) on *New Directions in Biopower: Ethics and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*. DANIEL W. SMITH is an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at Purdue University. He is the translator of Gilles Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* and *Essays Critical and Clinical* (with Michael A. Greco), as well as Pierre Klossowski's *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle* and Isabelle Stenger's *The Invention of Modern Science*. A collection of his essays on the work of Gilles Deleuze will be published in 2011.

again at the beginning of the nineteenth, people experienced their relation to their bodies, to others, they experienced their freedom more as a libertinism than as a kind of precise categorization of a sexual behavior linked to psychology, linked to a desire. Thus, homosexuality—a recent category.

That the category of homosexuality was taken up again in the struggles that took place at the end of the nineteenth century against a certain form of morality, against certain laws, against certain judicial rulings—all this is absolutely clear. All you have to do is look at the notion of homosexuality in 1870 to see, if you will, that the great debate on homosexuality, and against the segregation of homosexuality, took off in the next twenty years and to realize that there was an absolutely correlative phenomenon to all this: it was an attempt to imprison people within this notion of homosexuality, and naturally they fought back—people like Gide, like Oscar Wilde, like Magnus Hirschfeld, and so on.

So when I point to the historical character of this notion of homosexuality, it's not to say that it was wrong to fight against this notion. On the contrary, I'm saying that it was indeed necessary to fight against it, since it was itself a historico-political "takeover" [*prise*] that people had tried to impose on a form of experience, on a form of relation, on a form of pleasure that they wanted to exclude. Now I think that, in our time, the very notion of sexuality—I'm not even speaking of the notion of homosexuality—it seems necessary to reevaluate it or, rather, to make a new evaluation of it.

In earlier struggles, it had been absolutely indispensable to take it seriously, as it were. And to say what we have before us, or above us, are doctors, teachers, legislators, adults, parents, and so on, who are talking about sexuality. Well, OK, if you want to talk about it, let's talk about it. And we're going to give certain rights to sexuality. That's all well and good. It doesn't mean that the rights of sexuality are all recognized. In any case, the battle, let's say, was both expanded and solidified.

I think that, now, it will be necessary, in a sense, to take a jump backward—which does not mean to retreat but rather to retake the situation on a larger scale. And to ask, but what, in the end, is this notion of sexuality? Because if it has allowed us to fight, it also has a number of dangers built into it. There's a whole psychologism about sexuality, a whole biologism about sexuality, and consequently a possible takeover [*prise*] of sexuality by doctors, by psychologists, by all the authorities of normalization. Against this medico-biologico-

naturalist notion of sexuality, isn't it necessary to put forward [*faire valoir*] something else? For example, the rights of pleasure?

LE BITOUX: And thereby escape from a new discourse that . . .

FOUCAULT: And escape from a new discourse that was constituted, in a certain sense, in the wake of these liberation movements. Put differently, you not only have to liberate your sexuality, you also have to liberate Dr. Meignant.¹ There it is! In other words, we have to liberate ourselves even from this notion of sexuality. This was the movement that I was trying to sketch out, which thus is not a break from the struggles but, on the contrary, is a simple suggestion for an expansion of the struggles and a kind of change in the background, a change in the axis, of the struggles.

LE BITOUX: Otherwise, it is a simple sectorial struggle that exhausts itself in its own words.

FOUCAULT: Exactly. For example, I believe it's very difficult to carry on the struggle using the terms of sexuality without, at a certain point, getting trapped by notions such as sexual disease, sexual pathology, normal sexuality. Hence the need to pose the problem differently. This is why, in a way that is, at the moment, absolutely sketchy [*en pointillé*] and for which I have as yet no content, I was putting forward, if you will, the theme of pleasure. Which seems to me to escape these medical and naturalist connotations and which have the notion of sexuality built into them. After all, there is no "abnormal" pleasure; there is no "pathology" of pleasure.

LE BITOUX: And pleasure, in itself, is indisputable.

FOUCAULT: Exactly. This was, roughly speaking, the direction of the book. And I think that by now readers have reestablished this sense.

LE BITOUX: At first sight, it was a surprising thing to say.

FOUCAULT: That's true. And in any case, it wasn't a critique of the earlier movements but rather an assessment of a historical situation, an assessment that a battle cannot always be carried out in the same terms without becoming sterile, immobile, trapped. Thus, a change on the battlefield. And as a result, a change in vocabulary. A change in objectives is absolutely necessary as well.

LE BITOUX: A much larger question: do you perceive social relations to be a permanent and imperative circulation of desire?

FOUCAULT: What do you mean?

LE BITOUX: The desire that passes through society is phagocytic. When

1. Michel Meignant was a popularizer of the notion of sexology and the founder of the popular journal *Union*.

pleasure gives pleasure only to itself, society feels as if it is called into question, excluded. At that moment, social relations are not alienated in roles or in social imperatives.

FOUCAULT: Hmm. I suppose the question turns on this notion of desire. So here, if you like, I believe the problem of “pleasure-desire” is currently an important problem. I would even say that it is *the* problem that has to be debated in this reevaluation—this rejuvenation, in any case—of the instruments, objectives, and axes of the struggle.

It’s such a difficult problem that I believe we would have to talk about it at great length, to devote almost an entire discussion to it. I would say, schematically, that medicine and psychoanalysis have made extensive use of this notion of desire, precisely as a kind of instrument for establishing the intelligibility of a sexual pleasure and thus for standardizing it in terms of normality. Tell me what your desire is, and I’ll tell you who you are. I’ll tell you if you’re sick or not, I’ll tell you if you’re normal or not, and thus I’ll be able to disqualify your desire or on the contrary requalify it. This is rather obvious, it seems to me, in psychoanalysis. In any case, if we look at the very history of the notion of desire, from Christian concupiscence, through the sexual instinct of the 1840s, and up to the Freudian and post-Freudian notions of desire, I think we’d see pretty clearly how this notion functions.

Deleuze and Guattari obviously use the notion in a completely different way.² But the problem I have is that I’m not sure if, through this very word, despite its different meaning, we don’t run the risk, despite Deleuze and Guattari’s intention, of allowing some of the medico-psychological presuppositions [*prises*] that were built into desire, in its traditional sense, to be reintroduced. And so it seems to me that, by using the word *pleasure*, which in the end means nothing, which is still, it seems to me, rather empty of content and unsullied by possible uses—in treating pleasure ultimately as nothing other than an event, an event that happens, that happens, I would say, outside the subject, or at the limit of the subject, or between two subjects, in this something that is neither of the body nor of the soul, neither outside nor inside—don’t we have here, in trying to reflect a bit on this notion of pleasure, a means of avoiding the entire psycho-

2. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L’Anti-Oedipe*, vol. 1 of *Capitalism et schizophrénie* (Paris, 1972). Deleuze wrote the introduction to a book by Guy Hocquenghem, and Guattari was the editor of the journal *Recherches*, which produced the 1973 special issue about FHAR (Front Homosexuel d’Action Révolutionnaire).

logical and medical armature that was built into the traditional notion of desire?

This is just a series of questions. I'm fundamentally not attached to the notion of pleasure, but I'm quite frankly hostile to the pre-Deleuzian, non-Deleuzian notion of desire. But this is all, let's say, on the order of a methodological precaution. The main thing is this notion of an event that is not assigned, and is not assignable, to a subject. Whereas the, let's say, nineteenth-century notion of desire is first and foremost attached to a subject. It's not an event; it's a type of permanent characteristic of the events of a subject, which for this reason leads to an analysis of the subject, a medical analysis of the subject, a judicial analysis of the subject. Tell me what your desire is, and I'll tell you what you are as a subject.

LE BITOUX: In what ways does masturbation, even more than incest, seem to you to be the major taboo in the sexuality of the nineteenth-century bourgeois family?

FOUCAULT: Indeed, masturbation seems to me to be a key point. Because for the child it is certainly the prohibition against masturbation that initiates the restrictive relation to sexuality. He lives his body, he lives his pleasure under the sign of this prohibition, insofar as what is prohibited is this immediate pleasure of his body and this fabrication of pleasure from his own body, which is masturbation.

Second, it was, if you will, the major prohibition, but, at the same time, it was the basis upon which a knowledge [*savoir*] of sexuality, properly speaking, was constituted historically. Because when you look at what happened until between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, people were asked about their desires, they were asked to confess their desires, and these practices always concerned one's relations. That is, in some sense, they were concerned with a juridical sexuality. Are you fulfilling your matrimonial duty to your wife? Are you unfaithful to your wife? Do you make love to her in the way required by natural right? Are you doing it with another woman or another man? At the limit, could your partner be an animal? Hence, a relational jurisdiction about sex. This relational jurisdiction dealt with real practices and not intentions, or desires, or what were called concupiscences.

What begins to appear in the sixteenth century, along with the great reform of pedagogy, as well as what might be called, if you will, the colonization of childhood—or, rather, the separating out of childhood as a special chronological category in the life of individuals—at this moment, what begins to appear in confession

manuals, in treatises for the “direction of conscience,” and so on, is an essential problem, which is, isn’t your desire above all and essentially about yourself? It is very curious to see how, in these confession manuals, the fundamental question is no longer, are you unfaithful to your wife? or, are you seeing a woman who is not your wife? The first question is, do you sometimes engage in the practice of touching yourself? So what becomes primary is the relation of the self to itself.

At this point, an entire knowledge [*savoir*] will be developed, which will no longer be the knowledge [*connaissance*], as it were, of the juridical status of the relations between the sexes, but a knowledge of the intimacy of sex itself, in its genesis, in its first movements, in its very first impressions, and in this relation of the self to itself. As a result, a whole new psychology will be born, which has little to do with the rights of the sexes but with the immediate nature of sexuality. And it is here, at the juncture between Christian confession and medicine, that the very notion of sexuality will be born.

Sexuality is going to replace concupiscence. Concupiscence was linked to sexual relations. Sexuality is something that one has within oneself, a kind of dynamic, a movement, a perpetual impulse that is oriented toward a primary pleasure, which is the pleasure of one’s own body. Thus, masturbation is situated at a very important strategic position in the West since it is the first form of prohibition and, historically, the first form of the problematization of sexuality. This is why I ascribe so much importance to masturbation. It is interesting to see how, in the same period, from the sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries, it will become the essential problem, for both Catholics and Protestants. In the eighteenth century, you’re going to have the great campaign against childhood masturbation, with the famous myth that was formulated with such fanfare at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, which tells us that the human species runs the risk of wasting away if this new disease that is masturbation starts spreading. Through a very curious phenomenon, masturbation is almost experienced as a recent epidemic that previous generations had never known.

So my hypothesis, in fact, is that, on the one hand, what was new was that this became a problem. But the novelty was displaced, in a sense; people claimed that masturbation was new, whereas it was the problem that was new. On the other hand, I

also believe we have to add that the entire practice of pedagogy, all the games of surveillance, concern, and anxiety that could take place between children and parents have begun to focus on these solitary pleasures, this sensual pleasure that the self takes with itself. The body of the child has become an issue [*enjeu*] for the parents and thus for the children as well. Suddenly, masturbation had seemingly intensified, not necessary in its practice, but certainly in its value. Masturbating or not masturbating had become more and more important.

LE BITOUX: It became a reference point.

FOUCAULT: It became a reference point and an issue [*enjeu*] in the struggle between children and parents. And masturbating under the nose of one's parents became a very important behavior for children, which seems to have had psychological consequences that the same gesture would absolutely not have had before. We can indeed say that there was, in the eighteenth century, a genuine fabrication of masturbation, a genuine invention.

LE BITOUX: So homosexuality is not the first invention of medical knowledge.

FOUCAULT: No, the first invention is masturbation, linked to the separating out of this type of new reality of sexuality, as opposed to what had been concupiscence and the relation between the sexes.

LE BITOUX: I will perhaps take up my questions in a different order. The following question concerns homosexuals. Why do you think the pleasure they find in expressing tenderness and happiness turns out to be more socially inadmissible than the fact of talking about it or than the act of sodomy?

FOUCAULT: Good, I think this is an important question. I'm not sure that what I say is true. My impression is that the practice—sodomitic, so to speak, or homosexual—is generally accepted. First of all, people can tolerate the pleasure, but they can't accept the happiness. They accept the practice, that's an observable fact [*fait de constatation*] because sodomitic practice is not only a homosexual fact, since it's also heterosexual.

Second, at bottom, no matter how rigid and puritanical Christian civilization was, this rigidity could not have functioned without, of course, a certain range of tolerance that was the condition of its functioning. Just as delinquency is the condition for the functioning of the penal system, just as the existence of unpunished crimes allows other crimes to be punished; if every offense were punished, the system wouldn't work (*laughs*). In short, illegalism is part of the

functioning of the law. And as a result, prohibited practices are part of the functioning of the law that prohibits them. Because of this, licentious practices are tolerated and even accepted.

Pleasures are tolerated. I say they're tolerated because I wonder if there hasn't been, in societies like ours, at least in the last few years, a kind of expansion of the economy of pleasure. That is to say, there are societies that admit not only all desires but all practices, and yet not all pleasures. There is a certain quality of pleasure, a certain sum of pleasures, which is scandalous to put on view. All the more so in this new economy of pleasure, which looks like something indispensable but is only partially important. After all, pleasure fades just as youth fades. "If that's their pleasure, then they should enjoy it. It won't get them very far; we know they'll have pain and grief enough, and that they'll pay dearly for this pleasure they're enjoying; by their solitude, by their break-ups, by their arguments, by their hatred, by their jealousies, and so on." They know that pleasure will be paid for, and consequently it doesn't bother them.

But happiness? Who says that pleasure can only be bought by something like a fundamental unhappiness? This is the thing that blows apart this compensated economy of pleasures and which is intolerable. Because then, if they not only practice openly what is forbidden to others, and experience pleasure in doing so, but on top of all that, there is nothing that makes them pay for these pleasures or forms, a backlash against these forbidden practices, then everything blows up.

LE BITOUX: If they cannot even punish themselves?

FOUCAULT: If they cannot even punish themselves. And this is why, in the end, I believe that two homosexuals, no, two boys who are seen leaving together to go sleep in the same bed are tolerated. But if they wake up the next morning with a smile on their faces, if they hold hands and kiss each other tenderly and thereby affirm their happiness, then no one will forgive them. What's unbearable is not leaving in search of pleasure but waking up happy.

LE BITOUX: We should talk about the sodomitic act. Tolerance is situated at the level of speech. But happiness does not have words, so it can't be disputed. One cannot manipulate an event that just took place. Saying and naming become insufficient. The fact radiates from itself, so it is excluded.

FOUCAULT: You are completely right. Because, after all, a desire, or in any case some practice, can always be explained. There will always be a

homo who will have seen his parents sodomizing each other, and as a result his practice will be explainable. But his happiness?

LE BITOUX: This is what creates such problems . . .

FOUCAULT: Between the two, there would have been pleasure. Pleasure, yes, if we know that there was anguish afterwards. In the case of the act, there is a phantasm that grounds the desire in this way. But what is there behind happiness? Our explanatory powers no longer have anything to say, and this is what is intolerable. There is no anguish behind the happiness; there is no phantasm behind the happiness.

LE BITOUX: One can observe in the imagery of homosexuals that some of them have an attraction for or indeed an identification with femininity. Is there a “becoming-woman” in masculine homosexuality?

FOUCAULT: (*laughs*) Well, if you don’t mind, we will put aside the expression *becoming-woman*. This is, again, a very important problem.

LE BITOUX: I want to talk not only about the imagery of homosexuals but also about this identification, this moving toward femininity or even transvestism.

FOUCAULT: Yes, but this is incredibly complicated. I really can only play the fool here [*je n’y vois vraiment que du feu*]. That being said, one thing is certain. Historically, when you look at what homosexual practices were, as they appeared on the surface, it is absolutely correct that the reference to femininity has been very important, at least certain forms of femininity. This is the whole problem of transvestism; it was not strictly linked to homosexuality, but it was nonetheless a part of it.

Moreover, I would say that transvestism has in fact more often been linked to heterosexuality than to homosexuality. That is to say, one of the important sites of transvestism was, for example, the army—women who dressed up as boys and followed the army around, leading the life of a prostitute, or a hussy [*gourgandine*], or a voracious woman (*laughs*). These societies—the army, the monastery—highly monosexual institutions, brought forth transvestism within the framework of heterosexuality. After all, Chérubin was a transvestite, but a heterosexual transvestite.

What I find striking is that when homosexuality became a medico-psychiatric category in the second half of the nineteenth century it was immediately analyzed through a grid of intelligibility, which was hermaphroditism. What is a homosexual, or under what form does the homosexual make its entrance into medicine, if not under the form of hermaphroditism? That is to say, those whose sexual interest would be in some way doubled and who would carry some sort of twinning with them, making them a man

and a woman at the same time. The notion of psychic hermaphroditism has been proposed, which has led, as you know, to all sorts of analyses (*laughs*) and interventions through hormonal transformation.

Then there was this kind of very complicated game in which all the takeovers [*prises*] that one wanted to impose through the intermediary of medical and psychiatric knowledge have been turned inside out. We're all hermaphrodites? All right, let's go! And I will be even more woman than the doctor claims I am. And between the analysis of homosexuality through a secret femininity and the bravado [*défi*] of the queen [*la folle*] declaring herself to be woman, there has certainly been a historical correspondence at play. A response through the bravado [*défi*] of the similar. This is what you want me to be? Well, then, I will be absolutely similar to what you want, I will be even more similar than you believe, to a point where you'll be, in the end, completely flabbergasted [*au point que tu vas en rester finalement sur le cul*] (*laughs*).

LE BITOUX: This can be seen clearly in Magnus Hirschfeld's theory of the third sex and the emphasis on chromosomal error or genes, which put limits on the response of the first homosexual movement at the beginning of the century. This identity, which was, in a sense, wandering [*errante*], quickly opened itself up to being co-opted [*a vite prêté le flanc à la récupération*].

FOUCAULT: Exactly. And here we see clearly the complexity of all these games; the doctors who begin to say, "but they're hermaphrodites, and so they're degenerates," and the homosexual movements that retort, "but since you consider us a mixture of the sexes, we therefore have a specific sexuality. We are either two sexes at the same time, or a third sex that consists of having two sexes."

LE BITOUX: So homosexuals become transvestites [*se travestir*].

FOUCAULT: So homosexuals become transvestites. And about this, the doctors say, "OK, a third sex, but you'll see, that can be fixed with a good hormonal treatment." To which the queens [*les folles*] reply, "but we don't want your hormones. Or if we want them, it will be to really transform ourselves into women. What we want are the hormones of women." In short, we see a whole series of movements that are strategically analyzable.

LE BITOUX: And each of them appeals to the other.

FOUCAULT: Exactly.

LE BITOUX: And they're looking for a negation of identity or a new identity.

FOUCAULT: Yes, a sort of zigzag of strategies that respond to each other and

that are very interesting. Which thereby makes the question of femininity appear again at the heart of homosexuality with great ambiguity. Because it gives medicine a hold [*prise*] on all this. But, more recently, it allowed one to deploy a counterattack and an inverse strategy. And to say, "but after all, this question of femininity, how is it treated, in general, in a phallocratic culture like ours?"

As a result, a strategic possibility of relations with feminist movements emerges. And the right for homosexuals to say, "our preference [*goût*] for men is not a different form of the phallocratic cult but rather a certain way for us, who are men, to pose the question of femininity. For us to pose the question as well." Politically, it was very interesting.

At the moment, what seems to be happening in the United States could appear to be a kind of reflux movement, as if they were falling back onto a monosexual machismo, where men flaunt all the signs of masculinity in order to keep to themselves. As if they had again lowered an iron curtain between men and women. Unshaven [*tout pilieux*] homosexuals with mustaches have become the eroticized morphological type of the homosexual today. He has to be at least thirty-five years old, built like a baseball player, with an enormous mustache and whiskers everywhere [*du poil partout*]. To this, you add the motorcycle cap, the leather pants, the jacket, the chains, and so on.

But in the end, when you look at this a little more closely, what strikes me is that all these get-ups, all these brazen displays [*mise en blason*] of masculinity, absolutely do not coincide with a revaluation of the male as male. For, on the contrary, out of sight and under the cover of this brazen masculinity, what emerges are types of masochistic sexual relations or masochistic assertiveness in which there is no valorization of the male as male. Absolutely none. On the contrary, these uses of the body could be defined as desexualized, as devirilized, like fist fucking or other extraordinary fabrications of pleasures, which Americans reach with the help of certain drugs or instruments.

Moreover, the relations between these men in everyday life, who are sometimes equally involved in the practices of a communal sexual life, are tender and affectionate. In short, they use the signs of masculinity but not at all to return to something that would be of the order of phallocratism or machismo, but rather to invent themselves, to allow themselves to make their masculine body a place for the production of extraordinarily polymorphous

pleasures, detached from the valorizations of sex and particularly the male sex.

To some degree, this is also what takes place in feminist movements, it seems to me. Look at what Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkielkraut say in *The New Love Disorder*,³ in which there are pages specifically on pleasure and the necessity of detaching oneself from the virile form of pleasure governed [*commandé*] by orgasm [*jouissance*] in the ejaculatory and masculine sense of the term, which are as valid for feminine sexuality as they are for the sexuality of these homosexuals. This has a rather astonishing similarity with what homosexual sexuality is today in the United States.

This new advance seemingly makes it possible to free oneself of this idea—which has certainly been interesting from a strategic perspective—that masculine homosexuality would have a fundamental relation with femininity. We no doubt have to take a step back from this idea today. And therefore try to think homosexuality as a certain relation to the body and to pleasures that don't need to be made intelligible, in themselves, by referring to femininity.

LE BITOUX: One can also see, for example in advertising or fashion, the extent to which femininity is an invention of man for man via the woman as object. In the end, there is no longer a feminine except as a transvestite. This is borne out by the fascination certain men have when, through the demystifying gestures of the transvestite, they discover the ruses of what they thought to be pure femininity. It is, as it were, the projection outside themselves of a phantasm whose object has changed.

FOUCAULT: Yes, indeed.

LE BITOUX: But these American masculine attributes you were talking about are those of thugs [*loubards*], who are quite aggressive toward us.

FOUCAULT: Yes, but as far as I know, things change quickly in the United States. I was in California two years ago, and there never seemed to be a conflict between homosexuals wearing flat-caps and leather jackets and the American equivalent of our thugs. In fact, what is more intriguing, in Paris, as you well know, is that a boy cannot walk at night in certain districts wearing a *perfecto* jacket without being confronted by thugs, who ask him what right he has to dress that way.

3. See Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkielkraut, *Le Nouveau Désordre amoureux* (Paris, 1977).

Needless to say, if the thugs in question suspect that he's a homosexual, not only will they steal the *perfecto*, but the guy will be beaten to a pulp. We have here a difficult problem between homosexuals and this visibly aggressive marginality. It is a tradition in France to beat up homosexuals [*se fassent casser la gueule*]. There was a time, for example, when it wasn't the thugs but the soldiers stationed at the Duplex barracks who went out at night to beat up the queers [*pédés*] on the Champs-de-Mars. That was their entertainment: to beat the living daylight out of queers [*aller se payer un pédé*]. I believe this problem was never tackled sufficiently or adequately. I don't know if there was a full enough debate on this question within the homosexual movements.

LE BITOUX: No, not really. Thugs have always had a fascination-repulsion toward queers. Within these groups of thugs, constituted around a latent homosexual desire, one has to seek an outlet outside the gang, with someone who is, above all, not one of their own. In the homosexual movement, the only thing that was debated was the question of self-defense. The debate only concerned the question of self-defense. The real problem was the aggression between men, and it was not resolved.

FOUCAULT: Did a movement like "Marge" ever raise this problem?⁴

LE BITOUX: I don't think so.

FOUCAULT: It seems to me that it should have been raised there. After all, for queers to ask about the reasons that make thugs attack them is interesting, but somewhat speculative. (*laughs*)

LE BITOUX: I have a friend in the suburbs who opened his apartment to the thugs of this district, who then had sex with each of them. This allowed him to bring up the question of homosexuality and to make them stop beating up queers.

FOUCAULT: How many times did they have to bugger each other to get at this marvelous result? (*laughs*)

LE BITOUX: How is the practice of baths a confrontation between one's own body and those of others?

FOUCAULT: (*laughs*) Oh la la. We've already talked about this, I think. First of all, there's my surprise that one often reads—and not only in France, moreover—critiques against this or that sexual practice: sharing a house with a boy isn't good because it's bourgeois. Making love furtively in a public toilet isn't good because it means accepting

4. *Marge* is the name of a journal of a small libertine group holding the same name, carrying some revolutionary truth.

the bourgeois ghetto. Third, going to a bath and getting off with people whose names you don't even know, with whom you don't even speak a word. . . .

LE BITOUX: It's consumption.

FOUCAULT: It's consumption, and so (*laughs*) it's the bourgeois world. OK.

All this seems a bit naïve to me. All these things, and by definition all the rest, have no meaning other than a strategic one. It is strategically important to live in the most explicit way possible, with someone you love, who can be a boy if it's a boy, a man if it's a man, an old man if it's an old man.

It's strategically important, when you meet a boy in the street, to kiss him and possibly make love to him, even in the back seat of a car, if you want. In the same way, I'm saying that it's important for there to be places like baths where, without being imprisoned or pinned in your own identity, in your legal status, your past, your name, your face, and so on, you can meet the people who are there, and who are for you—as you are for them—nothing more than bodies, with whom the most unexpected combinations and fabrications of pleasure are possible. This is absolutely an important part of erotic experiences, and it is, I would say, politically important that sexuality can function in this way.

It is simply regrettable that there are not places like this for heterosexuality. After all, why wouldn't it be something rather marvelous for heterosexuals who wanted to be able to do something like that, in the middle of the day or night, to go to a place equipped with every comfort and every possibility (*laughs*), all the well-being you could imagine? To encounter bodies that are both present and fleeting? Places where you desubjectivize yourself, that is, you desubjugate yourself in a way that is, I'm not saying the most radical, but in any case in a way that is intense enough so that this moment is, in the end, important.

LE BITOUX: You could even say that this is subversive, insofar as you are never more pinned down than by yourself, and thus, in the bath, you're surprised by the very idea you have of yourself through your sexual identification, through the codifications that have been given to the pleasures you've had. Anonymous in a bath, you are free to dispossess yourself of that as well. Along with others in the same situation, we can find out things about our own relation to ourselves. This kind of anonymity is subversive.

FOUCAULT: Absolutely. The intensities of pleasure are indeed linked to the fact that you desubjugate yourself, that you cease being a subject, an

identity. It is like an affirmation of nonidentity. Not only because you leave your ID card in the changing room but because the multiplicity of possible things, of possible encounters, of possible pilings-up [*amoncellements*], of possible connections, means that, in effect, you cannot *not* fail to be identical to yourself. You could even say that, at the limit, it desexualizes (*laughs*). In this sense, the moment constitutes a kind of underwater dive sufficiently intense that you emerge from it without desire, both in the strict sense and in the good sense of the term. Without any of that appetite and without any of that yearning [*lacinement*] that we sometimes have, even after relatively satisfactory sexual relations.

And, finally, it's important to know, it's necessary to know, just like that, no matter where you are, no matter what city you're in, that there is always a kind of great cellar, open to whomever wants to go, whenever they want to go, a stairway that you simply have to walk down (*laughs*), in short, a marvelous place where you can fabricate, for as long as you like, the pleasures you want.⁵

LE BITOUX: This also allows us to understand the extent to which sexual tensions can cause damage in so many lives. Heterosexuality can be more susceptible to such difficulties because it does not have access to such places, to this possibility for regeneration.

FOUCAULT: You know, when we think of those unhappy heterosexuals who, in the end, only have their wife, their mistress, or a prostitute . . . (*laughs*).

LE BITOUX: In the best cases!

FOUCAULT: In the best cases. You know, they should rather be pitied. All the same, there is an important experience there.

LE BITOUX: Let's talk about nightclubs. We've already talked about this. Aren't they a reaffirmation of roles, of money? These places are much less harassed by the police than the parks or baths. I won't talk about the ghetto because militant phraseology puts regenerative places and alienating places in the same basket. What do you think?

FOUCAULT: Well, here, I wouldn't follow you entirely. Certainly, I've just given a eulogy for the baths (*smiles*). But I wouldn't want to criticize anything. In any case, I don't think we need to say that baths are good but nightclubs are not. Nightclubs, after all, you know . . .

In Japan, for example, they exist. There are thousands of them. In Tokyo, in Kyoto. Tiny nightclubs where there is only enough room for five or six people (*laughs*). Oh, nothing much happens there;

5. Michel Foucault is here describing the Continental, an underground bath, the largest in Europe, located close to the Opéra de Paris.

people sit on their stools, they chat, they drink, they get drunk. In fact, there aren't many possibilities for encounters.

The arrival of a foreigner or someone unfamiliar with the nightclub is an event, because generally it is the regulars, or always the same people, that you find in them. There is a kind of communitarian life there, which, in a society like that of Japan, is important because marriage is an obligation. So, in the evening, they go to their nightclub to meet up with their small and constant [*peu mobile*] community, with its faithful members and other users. So, after all, why shouldn't a nightclub be pleasant?

To be sure—and this is true for baths as well—these places are plugged into an entire racket: an economy, the police, the mob, which greatly modifies the positive meaning that these places could have. Superimposed on all this is an entire series of behaviors that we might call the homosexual theater: people come to be seen, for their beauty, for the beauty of their lovers, to show others their contempt, to mark distances, to make themselves visible, and so on. “Look at me, but keep your hands off.” Or, “how dare you look at me—I who have no desire to look at you?”

But whatever, a nightclub is a nightclub, and this homosexual theater is also found in pick-ups [*la drague*]. The problem is to know how strategically to turn the functioning of these places inside out. I don't know how things happen in Paris, but certainly two brave boys who want to open a nightclub couldn't do so without the police forcing them to cooperate with the mob. The police couldn't tolerate a homosexual nightclub that wasn't linked, in some way, to the mob [*la truanderie*].

LE BITOUX: And it's easy for them to make a minor go in who doesn't look his age and then have a police raid a minute later.

FOUCAULT: There you go.

LE BITOUX: In the legal sphere, there's a proposition by Caillavet that was approved by the Senate last June. It has to pass the French National Assembly in September. You were one of the signers of this proposal. Are we finally going to achieve a liberation of morals and particularly homosexuality?

FOUCAULT: More important is the project for the reform of the penal code, which has been completed and has just been submitted to the government office. I called them this morning and was told that all discrimination between homosexuality and heterosexuality has disappeared. This goes much further than the withdrawal of Mirguet's amendment. I don't know what the other clauses are. You know that

I've been consulted about this reform, along with René Scherer and Guy Hocquenghem, about the section regarding "sexual legislation."⁶ It wasn't easy because in theory there is no "sexual legislation." At the heart of it all, there was the issue of rape and the age of consent. For my part, I don't see how kids who, when they go to school, and see what they see on the walls or on TV, can still be considered to be minors, sexually speaking. I was surprised that the commission wasn't shocked when we proposed the thirteen to fifteen age range, as in Scandinavia.⁷

I think that, given the evolution we're seeing now, what we're about to discover is the extraordinary cost of what represents the exercise of a power that is, let's say, repressive. Of course, we know the works of the Trilateral on the cost of democracy and the cost of having a permissive society. It's true that we can calculate this. But we also do so in the other direction. And the cost of a repressive power is very high—not only the economic cost but also people's anger and that of their neighbors when faced with intolerance. This intolerance angers current liberation movements as much as the intellectual agitation, which itself plays a role as well. Which means the political cost of repression rises as well.

To put things crudely: Why blame homosexuals? What is the advantage of a society that hunts down homosexuals? The birth-rate? In the age of the pill? The struggle against syphilis? The technocrats and princes that govern us, even if they aren't malicious, aren't imbeciles either, and they know perfectly well that the struggle against syphilis, for example, doesn't happen through the repression of certain categories of individuals but through information campaigns. For example, in some American baths, there are small consultation offices at the entrance that allow one to know what's going on. This, in effect, is the only way. A rationalization of the exercise of power does not necessarily happen through an increase in repression; on the contrary. Repression has cost too much politically, and it runs the risk of costing even more in the current climate, with all these movements running

6. Militants and writers, René Scherer and Hocquenghem fought and published together. They were the instigators, in 1976, of a petition "For a Different Legislation Concerning the Sexuality of Minors," which was signed by Roland Barthes, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Louis Bory, Patrice Chereau, Deleuze, Guattari, Daniel Guérin, Pierre Guyotat, Bernard Kouchner, Jean-Paul Sartre, and so on, and published in *Libération* in February 1976.

7. See also the transcription of the audio debate among Foucault, Jean Danet, and Hocquenghem published in *Recherches*.

through society. So it's much more interesting to try to make people accept the rate of hyperunemployment they've been facing, and will so for years and years to come, rather than to piss everyone off by hunting down homosexuals in nightclubs and in the bushes. We've known this for a long time, but it has become clearer now. Power costs something. The exercise of power does not have a clear-cut benefit. Every time we commit an act that is an exercise of power, it has a cost, and not only an economic cost.