History of Sexuality, Vol. 1

Summary of the Argument:

The Original French subtitle was *Le Volonté de Savoir*. His topic, the history of sexuality, is part of a larger investigation of the relationship between knowledge and power.

In this book he is taking on the "repressive hypothesis," the idea that the history of sexuality has been the history of repression, restriction, and limitation. According to this hypothesis, the apex of this process is Victorian society, but we can see its roots in much earlier, especially Christian perspectives. From the point of view of the "repressive hypothesis," with the advent of the twentieth century, especially in the work of Freud, then Reich (et al), we have begun to liberate ourselves and a new sexual freedom is taking hold.

Foucault critiques this understanding of sexuality, along with an understanding of power that he describes as "juridico-discursive" in which power takes a legal, or at least "law-like" form, acting primarily in the form of restriction through first ecclesiastical, then legal structures.

Instead, Foucault proposes that power can be productive, and the history of sexuality is just such a phenomenon. In this case, this productive capacity is located with in certain projects of truth and knowledge.

Other cultures have had a sexual knowledge, but their sexual knowledge took the form of the *ars erotica*--a kind of apprenticeship in the art of pleasure, but in our (modern) western culture it has taken another form, a *scientia sexualis*, a science (knowledge) of sex. This has given rise to something different from bodily urges and pleasures, something "discursive," something that often goes by the name, "sexuality."

The repressive hypothesis has suggested that sex has been treated as a "secret," that we must now bring to light; we must speak the truth about it. But Foucault argues that in the modern world sex is not a secret, it is the secret, and the injunction to speak the truth about it, to confess, to research, to analyze, to know, is evidence of this productive expression of power.
Working from (what seems like?) a Marxist understanding of history, Foucault sees the emergence of this productive form of power as coinciding with the rise of industrial capitalism. But unlike the Freudian (et al) reading of this situation, which focused on repression as an attempt to redirect sexual energy towards economically productive activity, Foucault sees this as a productive dissemination of power intent on consolidating and defending the bourgeoisie as an emerging social force.

The dissemination of this power can be traced through at least four projects in the western *scientia sexualis*: (1) a hysterization of women’s bodies, (2) a pedagogization of children’s sex, (3) a socialization of procreative behavior, and (4) a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure.

In historical political terms we can understand this as a shift from the power of death that characterized the absolute regimes of previous European rulers to a power of life that is the mark of a “modern” society that has made significant strides in combating epidemic and famine.

So, while we have come to think of our sexuality as something central, even essential (in both a philosophical and practical sense), it is actually an expression of power that our society deploys in asserting control over us. Unlike the power of death that ended in the end of power, the power of life is pervasive and continual (ending only in death, presumably).