



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc

Scientia sexualis versus ars erotica: Foucault, van Gulik, Needham

Leon Antonio Rocha

Needham Research Institute, 8 Sylvester Road, Cambridge CB3 9AF, United Kingdom

Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RH, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 January 2011

Keywords:

Scientia sexualis

Ars erotica

Michel Foucault (1926–1984)

Robert van Gulik (1910–1967)

Joseph Needham (1900–1995)

Sinography

ABSTRACT

This paper begins with a discussion of the *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* distinction, which Foucault first advances in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, and which has been employed by many scholars to do a variety of analytical work. Though Foucault has expressed his doubts regarding his conceptualization of the differences between Western and Eastern discourses of desire, he never entirely disowns the distinction. In fact, Foucault remains convinced that China must have an *ars erotica*. I will explore Foucault's sources of authority. To this end, I introduce the work of famous Dutch sinologist Robert Hans van Gulik, who published the tremendously influential *Sexual Life in Ancient China* in 1961, and also explore Joseph Needham's view on Chinese sex. I argue that, Foucault, in his fierce polemic against the "Repressive Hypothesis", himself imagined a utopian Other where pleasure and desire were organised differently. I end on a discuss on Orientalism and the project of "Sinography" of comparative literature scholars Haun Saussy, Eric Hayot and others.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*

What we must work on, it seems to me, is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasure.

— Michel Foucault¹

1. Themes of the paper

This paper is broadly concerned with a number of themes, which will be delineated before Foucault's *scientia sexualis* and *ars erotica* distinction, from *History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, is explored. The first is the history of French intellectual thought in the twentieth century. This paper advocates a return to Foucault's classic work to investigate Foucault's sources of information. The recent publication of Graham Burchell's translations of Foucault's lectures at the *Collège de France*, edited by Arnold Davidson, has encouraged scholars to pay close attention again to the evolution of Foucault's thought, to compare the lectures with his publications, to see what has been kept, elaborated,

omitted or altered. Foucault's books may be regarded as write-ups of his ideas—and sometimes they are *provisional* write-ups—and they do not necessarily demonstrate Foucault's thinking processes or provide readers with his sources. How did Foucault come to know what he knew? In the case of *History of Sexuality*, how did he come to know what he knew about "other" sexual cultures about which he made generalisations? This kind of consideration—finding out what kind of resources were available to French theorists, what sorts of books Foucault and his contemporaries encountered, what kind of primary sources or knowledge of other cultures they mobilised in their work—would help historians to understand the conditions under which French intellectuals produced their theoretical concepts. This in turn would help us understand what we are doing when we invoke and appropriate these theoretical concepts in our historical practice. My position is simple to articulate: if historians do not seriously examine the context under which terms—like the *scientia sexualis/ars erotica* distinction—come into being, then we may be carrying over all sorts of ideological baggage and problematic assumptions in our analyses.

E-mail address: LAR29@cam.ac.uk

¹ Foucault (1989, p. 206).

The second theme of this paper is the relationship between history of sexuality and East Asian history of science and medicine, particularly the question of circulation, transmission and transformation of knowledge across different cultures. In this episode, involving Foucault's distinction, we have an illustration of how the "East" features in the construction of the theoretical scholarship in the "West"—an often overlooked connection between French theory and the Sinological enterprise. Moreover, an analysis of the global networks of history of science and China scholarship, a reflection of the modes of production of pioneering generations of historians of East Asian science, and a study of their institutional affiliations, methodological divergences, political commitments, philosophical outlooks, and their communications and interactions with each other, will illuminate what we ourselves are trying to accomplish when we talk about the "East" and the "West", about "knowledge in transit" and globalising the history of science. Towards the end of this paper, the question of "Orientalism", translation and the project of "Sinographies"—associated with prominent comparative literature scholars such as Eric Hayot, Haun Saussy and Steven G. Yao—will be discussed.

2. Foucault's orthodoxy

Many of the claims that Michel Foucault makes in *History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* should be extremely familiar to all historians by now—in fact they have become something of an orthodoxy and a good deal of scholarship in the history of gender and sexuality basically takes Foucault to be correct, or at least, Foucault was "on to something". The first important lesson from *History of Sexuality Volume 1* is that sex has been colonised, exploited, deployed as a codeword, used as a point of anchorage for a whole variety of concerns: disciplining, governing and surveying a population; securing the sovereignty of a territory; maintaining the productivity of the nation through the regulation of reproduction and the bodily economy. As Foucault writes, sexuality is "useful for the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of manoeuvres and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin [*charnière*, literally a "hinge"] for the most varied strategies".² It is not as if everything is just an elaborate metaphor for sex—the pansexualist position—but rather, sex appears to be an elaborate metaphor for just about everything else.

Foucault's second important argument is that contemporary thinking about sexuality has been tainted by what he labels the "Repressive Hypothesis", which links together "the revelation of truth, the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come, and the promise of certain felicity".³ The Repressive Hypothesis is the conviction that the history of sex has been nothing but the history of painstaking repression, that the cultures of the past had denied individuals' sexual desires and their fundamental human nature, and what was therefore needed to liberate ourselves was the fullest affirmation of our inner drives and instincts. According to this view, we need to talk about sex openly in the public and to reject the sexual morality of the past, because it produced nothing but prudishness, obfuscation and dishonesty. Foucault disputes the idea that sex has been silenced and repressed, and argues that the discourse of sex has proliferated and intensified since the eighteenth century, reaching a peak in the middle-

late-nineteenth century with the inauguration of the sciences of sex.

Foucault further argues that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, sex became installed as the core of our being, perceived as "a kind of natural given which power tried to hold in check" and "an obscure domain which knowledge tried gradually to uncover".⁴ Sex was "implanted into bodies, slipped in beneath modes of conduct, made into a principle of classification and intelligibility, established as a *raison d'être* and a natural order of disorder".⁵ Then there are the many classical passages from *The Will to Knowledge*: Foucault argues that "the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him [...] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species".⁶ In what is a particularly lyrical passage, Foucault puts forward his "working hypothesis":

The society that emerged in the nineteenth century—bourgeois, capitalist, or industrial society, call it what you will—did not confront sex with a fundamental refusal of recognition. On the contrary, it put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it. Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it also set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex. As if it suspected sex of harbouring a fundamental secret. As if it needed this production of truth. As if it was essential that sex be inscribed not only in an economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge. Thus sex gradually became our object of great suspicion; the general and disquieting meaning that pervades our conduct and our existence, in spite of ourselves; the point of weakness where evil portents reach through to us; the fragment of darkness that we each carry within us: a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause, a fear that never ends ... we demand that sex speak the truth ... and we demand that it tells us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness ... From this interplay there has evolved, over several centuries, a knowledge of the subject; a knowledge not so much of his form, but of that which divides him, determines him perhaps, but above all causes him to be ignorant of himself ... the project of a science of the subject has gravitated, in ever narrowing circles, around the question of sex.⁷

One of the most elegant elaborations of Foucault's "working hypothesis" comes from Arnold Davidson's *Emergence of Sexuality*: it is not because we became preoccupied with our true sexuality that a science of sexuality arose in the nineteenth century; it is rather the emergence of a science of sexuality that made it possible, even inevitable, for us to become preoccupied with our true sexuality. Thus our existence became a *sexistence*, saturated with the promises and threats of sexuality".⁸ Davidson's project of "historical epistemology" develops from Foucault; Davidson tries to show how the experience of "sexuality" is linked to the emergence of new structures of knowledge, new institutions, new "styles of reasoning".⁹ I have quoted Foucault at length, because the passages cited

² Foucault (1978, p. 103).

³ Foucault (1978, p. 7).

⁴ Foucault (1978, p. 105).

⁵ Foucault (1978, p. 44).

⁶ Foucault (1978, p. 43).

⁷ Foucault (1978, pp. 69–70). Ellipses in original.

⁸ Davidson (2001a, p. 37). Italics in original.

⁹ Davidson (2001a, p. xiii).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1162213>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1162213>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)