

HS 478: Global Histories of Sexuality  
Foucault Reading Guide  
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Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* is one of the most important texts in the field. As you'll see, few historians grapple with the "historicity" of sexuality without, at some level, wrestling with the claims Foucault makes in this book. We are going to read about half of the book, capturing many (though not all) of its key themes. Though deeply interested in history, Foucault's work is often classified under the genre of "critical theory" (a classification that he would probably have rejected). This means that unlike a work of standard history, it deploys ideas and concepts in a fairly abstract manner, without always grounding its claims in concrete evidence. The book also can tend toward the ironic, often posing claims that Foucault himself does not agree with. The book was written in a particular context – the "sexual revolution" – and can, in some ways, be read as a response to that particular moment in history.

This brief guide poses some questions about the book that you should be able to (try to) answer as best preparation for our discussion of this difficult text.

- 1) What is the "repressive hypothesis?" Does Foucault agree with this idea? Why or why not?
- 2) Chapter 1 of part 2 is titled "The Incitement to Discourse." What is a discourse? What does Foucault mean by "incitement?"
- 3) One of the most famous passages of the book is from chapter 2, part 2, when Foucault discusses the relationship between sodomy and homosexuality. He says: "As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than a juridical subject of them. 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, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology...The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43). What might Foucault mean by this comparison?
- 4) Foucault often talks about the concept of "power" and indeed one of Foucault's main contributions was to give historians a new understanding of how power operates. How does Foucault understand this term? Who has power and how does it get used? (You may want to refer to pp. 48-49)
- 5) What is *Scientia sexualis* and why is this way of thinking about sex so important to European/Western histories of sexuality, according to Foucault?