WHAT IS THE REPRESSIVE HYPOTHESIS?

In Foucault’s words, the repressive hypothesis is merely “that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself” (Foucault, 23). Thus we are to either accept or reject the sexual repression hypothesis. But, by questioning the existence of such a repression, Michel Foucault is, in turn, raising the question as to why it was/is perceived that such a sexual repression ever existed, noting the fact that portraying past sex and sexualities as repressed provided a basis for the idea that by rejecting past moral systems future sex and sexualities may be “free.” As Foucault says,

> It was essential that the state know what was happening with its citizens’ sex, and the use they made of it, but also that each individual be capable of controlling the use he made of it. Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue, no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it (Foucault, 26).

This situation simply states that things were said in a different way; not any less was said on the matter of sex or sexuality in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. If the state needs to know what is happening with its citizens, logically, the easiest way for it to gain that knowledge is to restrict the movements and actions of its

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1 “What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights” (Foucault, 7).
According to Foucault, the question is, “In a specific type of discourse on sex, in a specific form of extortion of truth, appearing historically and in specific places (around the child’s body, apropos or women’s sex, in connection with practices restricting births, and so on), what were the most immediate, the most local power relations at work” (Foucault, 97)? When Foucault talks of power he is referring to the first instance in which large numbers of force relations operate and constitute their own organizations (the origin), the process which transforms, strengthens, or reverses them, and the behaviors in which they take affect. The true power comes from the majority and not the institutions which govern.¹ Foucault gives us five propositions regarding power (Foucault, 94-5):

1. Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared…power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations
2. Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations) but are immanent in the latter…they have a direct, productive role, wherever they come into play
3. Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix—no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body
4. Power relations are both intentional and non-subjective

¹ “By power I do not mean 'Power' as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. By power, I do not mean, either, a mode of subjugation which, in contrast to violence has the form of the rule. Finally, I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another, a system whose effects, through successive derivations, pervade the entire social body” (Foucault, 92).
5. Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power from which we are able to ascertain that power in the hands of governing constituencies is relatively useless. But neither does power exist within the individual. Power is everywhere, emanating from all social relationships; it comes from bottom-up, rather than top-down, as Foucault argues; society has the power, but it is the society that believed they were repressed. This, therefore, gives society power to create a, sort of, new type of sexuality; it is the repressors’ sexuality, in Foucault’s case, the Bourgeoisie.  

WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

In today’s society and culture, people are still fighting for sexual liberation, as seen largely in gay pride and other such demonstrations. As people become aware of sex and sexuality they are given the power to act on that awareness. But that still leaves us with the question: are people sexually repressed? And if so, under what constraints does this repression exist? If we look back at Foucault, we know his stance on the repressive hypothesis, the idea that people were repressed in a discursive manner—meaning that sex and sexuality was not to be discussed, acted upon, or observed in any such artistic, academic, political, or recreational manner; the idea that it could not exist outside the parents’ bedroom—could not have existed because it was talked about, Foucault gives us political and academic examples of psychiatrists and mental institutions, and, as we saw with Chauncey, it was acted upon.

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3 “This line was not the same as the one which founded sexuality, but rather a bar running through that sexuality; this was the taboo that constituted the difference, or at least the manner in which the taboo was applied and the rigor with which it was imposed. It was here that the theory of repression—which gradually expanded to cover the entire deployment of sexuality, so that the latter came to be explained in terms of a generalized taboo—had its point of origin” (Foucault, 128).

4 This conclusion was drawn largely from the book in its entirety but especially Chapter 4 of Gay New York, “The Forging of Queer Identities and the Emergence of Heterosexuality in Middle-Class Culture.”
So, are we sexually repressed in the twenty-first century? Maybe, but the basis of which that repression is expressed has changed. The idea of the discursive repression is history, and, today, individuals fight for sexual liberation in terms of societal acceptance. However, this doesn’t necessarily mean a repression. Logically, and according to Foucault’s propositions of power, power comes from the masses within a society and comes from the bottom and works its way up. We, as a society, have always been able to act upon our sexual urges, or lack of, and, therefore, sex and sexuality—including the levels of restriction and liberation—are constantly being reshaped and redefined. This modern fight for sexual liberation is merely the change of how sex and sexuality is now expressed.

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1 I say “maybe” largely because the radical part of me is begging for complete sexual liberation free of any judgment or discrimination.