While completing these books he was already gravely ill, a fact that may account for their turgid, sometimes repetitive presentation. In June 1984 Michel Foucault died in Paris of complications resulting from AIDS.

In some ways a quintessential Parisian intellectual, Foucault obtained remarkable success also in the English-speaking world. On several occasions he taught at the University of California at Berkeley. Although he was wary of being identified as a homosexual thinker tout court, he made no bones about his orientation, and could sometimes be found in the leather bars south of Market Street in San Francisco.

It is not surprising that scholars of homosexuality should be attracted to Foucault’s work, since apart from its [nonexclusive] focus on sexuality it accorded with several aspects of the spirit of the times. Discontent with the systems of Marx and Freud and their contentious followers had nonetheless left an appetite for new “megatheories,” which the Anglo-Saxon pragmatic tradition was unable to satisfy. Foucault’s thought was both ambitious and critical. Moreover, he attacked the oppression model, which saw the shaping of sexual minorities as merely a function of negative social pressures, while at the same time he denied that there was such a thing as a transhistorical homosexual, an invariant building block of social typology. In particular Foucault was influential among a group of gay and lesbian historians who rallied to a program called Social Construction. This approach sees human beings and their sexuality as artefacts of the spirit of the age in which they live. Social Construction also detects sharp breaks, “ruptures,” from one era to another. This concept of discontinuity was all the more welcome as the ground had been prepared by an influential American philosopher of science, Thomas Kuhn, whose concept of radical shifts in paradigm had been widely adopted. In vain did Foucault protest toward the end of his life that he was not the philosopher of discontinuity; he is now generally taken to be such.

As has been noted, the influence of Foucault has been complex and ramifying. Not since Jean-Paul Sartre had France given the world a thinker of such resonance. Yet Foucault’s work shows a number of key weaknesses. Not gifted with the patience for accumulating detail that since Aristotle has been taken to be a hallmark of the historian’s craft, he often spun elaborate theories from scanty empirical evidence. He also showed a predilection for scatter-gun concepts such as episteme, discourse, difference, and power; in seeking to explain much, these talismans make for fuzziness. Foucauldian language has had a seductive appeal for his followers, but repetition dulls the magic and banalization looms. More generally, Foucault found it hard to resist an anarchistic, “anything goes” vision of historical change, which leaves unanswered the question of why we are embedded in a temporal-cultural process from which it is useless to try to escape. Methodologically, his relativism permits no secure place from which to evaluate conflicting truth claims. Despite these criticisms, there can be no doubt of Foucault’s personal sincerity, and his generosity toward those who sought to consult him. Refusing to be bound by the somewhat rigid and old-fashioned training he had received in France, he boldly sought to open new vistas of enquiry. The lesson of Foucault then is his quest, rather than the particular points at which he arrived in his relatively short creative life.


Wayne R. Dynes

FOURIER, CHARLES (1772–1837)
French utopian philosopher and sexual radical. Fourier spent much of his
life in Lyon, trapped in a business world which he hated with a passion. Disillusioned in childhood by the dishonesty and hypocrisy of the people around him, he gradually formulated an elaborate theory of how totally to transform society in a utopian world of the future known as Harmony, in which mankind would live in large communes called Phalansteries.

Fourier hid his sexual beliefs from his contemporaries, and it was more than a century after his death before his main erotic work, Le nouveau monde amoureux, was first published. He was "modern" in many of his sexual attitudes, believing in the overthrow of traditional morality and universal replacement of this morality with a restrained and elegant promiscuity for everyone over the age of sixteen. He did not believe that anyone under sixteen had any sexual feelings, nor did he understand the psychology of sadism, pedophilia, or rape, so that his sexual theories are not entirely suitable for modern experimentation. Moreover, he had a bizarre belief that planets were androgynous beings that could and did copulate. He was attracted heterosexually to lesbians, and although he called pederasty "a depraved taste," he was tolerant of male homosexuals and ephebophiles. He recognized male homosexuals and lesbians as biological categories long before Krafft-Ebing created the modern concept of immutable sexual "perversions."

Fourier called for a "sexual minimum," the right of everyone to constant sexual gratification by means of teaching young people of both sexes to commit the "saintly" act of sexually sacrificing themselves to older people, rather like Lars Ullerstam's modern call for providing the poor with free prostitutes at the taxpayers' expense.

Fourier, however, had no sympathy for "gutter" sex or for promiscuity in the face of the threat of venereal diseases. He wanted these diseases to be done away with before sexual liberation would be allowed. He wrote some fictional episodes in the vein of William Beckford, one of which describes the seduction of a beautiful youth by an older man.

Stephen Wayne Foster

FRANCE

In its present basic form ("the hexagon") France emerged from the territory of the early Gauls and Franks during the central Middle Ages (1000-1270). Waves of repression of homosexuality by church and state have never succeeded in uprooting the homophile subculture, stifling the writing of erotic literature, or preventing homosexuals from occupying high positions. French politics and literature have exercised an incalculable influence on other countries, from England to Quebec, from Senegal to Vietnam. Whether justified or not, a reputation for libertine hedonism clings to the country, and especially to its capital, Paris—by far the largest city of northern Europe from the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries [when London surpassed it], making France a barometer of changing sexual mores.

The Middle Ages. Little of the exuberant homosexuality for which the ancient Celts, including the Gauls, were famed in antiquity seems to have survived the Roman occupation, Christian conversion, barbarian invasions, and finally the Frankish conquerors' adoption of Catholicism with its moral theology that pilloried as the "crime against nature" all nonreproductive forms of sexual expression. The heavy-drinking later Merovingians, descendants of the Frankish king Merovech and his grandson Clovis, who conquered all Gaul, were barbarians who indulged their sensual appetites freely. Lack of control allowed considerable sexual license to continue into the more Christianized Carolingian period (late eighth—ninth centuries), and probably to increase during
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