Foucault Studies

ARTICLE

Subversive Friendships: Foucault on Homosexuality and Social Experimentation

Mark Kingston, University of New South Wales

ABSTRACT: In some of his more obscure works, Michel Foucault characterises homosexual culture as being connected with an interesting practice of friendship. Since homosexual relationships cannot be derived from existing norms, they are inherently underdetermined, and this means that homosexual culture provides a space for the creation of new types of relationship. Inspired by this practice of social experimentation, Foucault puts forward a concept of friendship based on the collaborative creation of new relationships in marginal spaces. I argue that putting this concept of friendship into practice entails social activism in two ways: first, the creation of new relationships in marginal spaces constitutes a form of localised resistance to social normalisation, and second, because experimentation with relationships presents a challenge to the excessive normalisation of relationships on a societal scale. Friendship, for Foucault, is therefore a resource for both local resistance and large-scale social change. I also argue that Foucault's work on gay culture deserves more scholarly attention because it provides a supplement to his interpretation of the Enlightenment and forges a link between friendship and the aesthetics of existence.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Foucault, friendship, homosexuality, politics.

Philosophical inquiry into friendship in recent years has often sought to comprehend and respond to two closely related problems. The first is that friendship is largely understood as dependent on shared values and similarity between friends. The familiar notions of a "brotherhood of man" and political solidarity are derived from this understanding of friendship. However, to think of friendship in such terms is to assume that our shared background and common goals will naturally dictate the terms of our relationships. This leaves little room for us to exercise creativity in the relationships we build with others. A tradition that understands friendship as based on similarity thus deprives friendships of creativity and spontaneity. The second problem is that our relationships are strongly influenced by social norms, and often to a degree that is detrimental. A key example is friendship between men: owing to the way masculinity is constructed in the contemporary world, intimacy between men is seen as effeminate and is not readily accepted. Men who engage in close relationships with one another are often seen as lacking proper masculine self-sufficiency and as tending toward homosexuality. As Steve Garlick argues in his paper on Foucault, masculinity and friendship, this has left male-to-male friendship in an impoverished

state, burdened by formalities that aim to establish safe forms of interaction that are free from effeminate intimacy.[1] So the problem with social norms as guides to friendship is that they tend to produce excessively rigid relationships and perpetuate practices that ought to be discarded. Recently, thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida have responded to these problems by drawing together themes of friendship and difference, showing that relationships are not exclusively founded on the shared social background of their participants. Others, such as Sandra Lynch have responded by advocating a contemporary friendship characterised by creativity and uncertainty.[2] Michel Foucault has also addressed this topic, developing a concept of friendship based on social experimentation alongside his analysis of gay culture. However, in the context of recent debates on friendship, Foucault's contribution remains under-appreciated.[3] For this reason, I wish to discuss Foucault's concept of friendship in detail and show how it fits into the wider scheme of his work.

Foucault's most valuable discussions of homosexuality and friendship come from the late 1970s and early 1980s. A good selection can be found in the collection *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*,[4] edited by Paul Rabinow. In these essays and interviews, Foucault describes homosexual culture as involved in a process of social experimentation that aims to create novel relationships. Although, as I argued earlier, relationships between men are often highly normalised, homosexual relationships take place in a "marginal" space that exists beyond the boundaries of conventional masculine culture, where the norms that would otherwise govern relationships between men do not apply.[5] Homosexual relationships therefore need to be created rather than derived from an existing tradition. Of course, Foucault is not saying that homosexual culture is somehow outside of power. Rather, it is disconnected from the most totalising and normalising systems of power relations, and characterised instead by very dynamic and unstable systems of power relations. Likewise, Foucault does not believe that there are no social norms present in homosexual culture. Rather, the norms that apply to homosexual relationships are fewer and constitute an inadequate guide to creating an actual relationship. Homosexual culture is therefore, in Foucault's terminology, a space of greater freedom – where "freedom" means freedom from normalising effects of power and, consequently, the ability to create oneself.[6] Homosexual people are thus given a relational openness that allows for, and in fact necessitates, social experimentation.

In the following quote, from "Friendship as a Way of Life," Foucault illustrates this

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[1]   Steve Garlick, "The Beauty of Friendship: Foucault, Masculinity and the Work of Art," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28, 5 (2002), 56.

[2]   Sandra Lynch, *Philosophy and Friendship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

[3]   David Webb, for example, argues that Foucault's notion of friendship has an advantage over Derrida's in that it does not emphasise the "aporetic" or impossible nature of true friendship. "On Friendship: Derrida, Foucault and the Practice of Becoming," *Research in Phenomenology* 33 (2003), 119-140.

[4]   Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997).

[5]   Garlick, "The Beauty of Friendship." Garlick also provides an account of Foucault's notion of friendship, focussing on its links with existential phenomenology.

[6]   For a more detailed discussion of Foucault's concept of freedom see Paul Patton's "Taylor and Foucault on Power and Freedom," *Political Studies* 37, 2 (1989).

idea by describing both the excitement and the difficulty involved in forging homosexual relationships.

> As far back as I remember, to want guys was to want relations with guys. That has always been important for me. Not necessarily in the form of a couple but as a matter of existence: how is it possible for men to be together? To live together, to share their time, their meals, their room, their leisure, their grief, their knowledge, their confidences? What is it to be "naked" among men, outside of institutional relations, family, profession, and obligatory camaraderie?
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> Q. Can you say that desire and pleasure, and the relationships one can have, are dependent on one's age?
>
> M.F. Yes, very profoundly. Between a man and a younger woman, the marriage institution makes it easier: she accepts it and makes it work. But two men of noticeably different ages – what code would allow them to communicate? They face each other without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward each other. They have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless.[7]

Heterosexual romantic life brings an enormous array of norms into play: protocols for dating, guidelines for married life, norms that describe male and female roles, rules about how and why to show affection, and so on. Even where a relationship is unusual, as in Foucault's example of age difference in a marriage relationship, these norms still provide guidance. A homosexual couple, on the other hand, does not have such a wealth of norms to guide them, and are therefore left with the task of inventing their own way of being together. Homosexuality thus invites the creation of new forms of relationship.

Foucault fortifies his position with a critique of the idea of homosexuality as a fixed identity. He argues that there is no genuine homosexual identity, style or way of living and, accordingly, that people who embrace homosexuality are not realising an inner nature that has been hidden by an oppressive heterosexual hegemony. Rather, they must face the task of creating their own subjectivities – a task that is bound up with the creation of relationships with others. Foucault thus reiterates his argument against the "repressive hypothesis" in the context of homosexuality:

> [One] thing to distrust is the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of "Who am I?" and "What is the secret of my desire?" Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, "What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?" The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. .... The development toward which homosexuality tends is one of friendship.[8]

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[7]   Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth,* 136.
[8]   Ibid., 135-136.

Foucault thus conceives of homosexuality as a space for the construction of novel relationships and subjectivities, as opposed to a fixed identity that one can adopt or discover within oneself. This approach sets him apart from those who would engage in "identity politics" and ground solidarity among homosexual people in their common interests and identity. Its emphasis on similarity between group members and a shared way of life means that identity politics entails the creation of a rigid set of norms for homosexual relationships analogous to that which structures heterosexual relationships. An identity politics thus promotes conformity. Foucault, on the other hand, wants to put us on a path toward the creative and collaborative construction of subjectivity. This is essentially what he means by "friendship" – working together with others to build new subjectivities and relationships rather than falling back on social norms. It is a concept of friendship that privileges experimentation over traditional, institutional or racial bonds. It also privileges heterogeneity over homogeneity, in that it anticipates the creation of many different relationships based on the various preferences of their participants.

Given that he uses homosexual relationships as his key examples of friendship, Foucault's discussion may seem to be blurring the line between friendship, sexual relations and romantic love. However, this is not the case – he only wishes to avoid making the distinction between friendship and romantic love (a distinction that comes packaged with a great many social norms describing how these two relationships should work) and is still keen to distinguish between friendship and sexual relations. He must do so in order to then draw a distinction between the sexual and affective aspects of homosexuality. Foucault argues that "homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable"[9] and that the question is "how can a relational system be reached through sexual practices?"[10] He thus draws a strong distinction between sexual acts and desires on the one hand, and emotional ties on the other. There are two reasons why this distinction is necessary. First, Foucault associates sexual desire with the concept of a fixed identity. In the case of homosexuality, he is wary of the tendency to build a fixed identity around the desire for other men. That would be a problem because the notion of homosexuality as a fixed identity conflicts with the practice of experimental friendship that is the "desirable" aspect of homosexual culture. Second, for Foucault, affection can be subversive but sexual relations cannot. On their own, sexual relations are unchallenging and can easily be assimilated into our "sanitized"[11] society – the medical profession, for example, assimilated homosexuality as a form of sexual abnormality. New affective ties, on the other hand, are much more dangerous because they disrupt the social order, creating new relationships and interfering with existing ones. Therefore, because taking sexual desire as the essential part of homosexuality leads us to interpret homosexuality as a fixed identity, and because sex does not in itself contribute to the subversion of normalisation, Foucault must draw a distinction between homosexual desires and acts on the one hand, and the affective relations that occur between people brought together by this desire on the other.

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9 Ibid.,135-136.

10 Ibid., 137.

11 Ibid., 136. Cf., Marli Huijer, "The Aesthetics of Existence in the Work of Michel Foucault," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25, 2 (1999), 72.

We might therefore say that Foucault wants to take the "sexuality" out of "homosexuality," since he regards homosexuality as a social phenomenon that is essentially geared toward the production of novel relationships and only incidentally involves sex between men.

Another interesting aspect of Foucault's concept of friendship is that it entails two distinct activist projects. First, it entails localised resistance to social normalisation. This resistance happens when people disconnect themselves from the totalising and normalising systems of power relations that generally govern our relationships and, instead, create marginal spaces in which novel relationships can be constructed. In the contemporary world there are many such spaces, and they are not necessarily connected with homosexuality. There are women's groups, where women can challenge the gender roles given to them by our patriarchal society, there are communes and kibbutzes where people come together to pursue a collectivistic lifestyle, and there are punk and goth subcultures with members whose values differ distinctly from those held in mainstream society. Each of these spaces provides its members with a chance to subvert social normalisation and create new subjectivities and relationships in a collaborative environment. For Foucault, however, the key example of localised resistance through friendship is the culture of homosexual sadomasochism (or S & M). He argues that the relationships created through S & M are innovations on the traditional sexual relationship that can accommodate new forms of pleasure.

> I don't think that this movement of sexual practices has anything to do with the disclosure or the uncovering of S & M tendencies deep within our unconscious, and so on. I think that S & M is much more than that; it's the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously. The idea that S & M is related to a deep violence, that S & M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid. We know very well what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body – through the eroticization of the body. I think it's a kind of creation, a creative enterprise...[12]

Foucault thus regards S & M as an experiment in a new kind of relationship, and a key example of the practice of friendship. There are, however, two potential difficulties with this example. First, given the character of S & M, it might be objected that relationships of this kind simply substitute one code of norms for another. S & M relationships are, after all, no less structured than more conventional relationships. This is true, but we need to remember that what Foucault condemns is not norms but *normalisation*. If we create the norms of our relationships ourselves rather than relying on those prevalent in society, and we make sure those norms are modifiable (which is hopefully the case in S & M relationships) then we can avoid normalisation and keep our relational possibilities open. In other words, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with austere codes of norms as long as they are flexible and negotiable. The second difficulty is that Foucault has told us that sex is never genuinely subversive, and that friendship is actually about new affective relationships and social

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[12]   Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth.* Edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 165.

structures, yet his key example of friendship is a relationship that is fundamentally sexual. S & M may therefore seem like a poor example of subversive friendship. However, there are two things to note in Foucault's defence. First, S & M may be based on sex acts, but nonetheless it also creates new affective ties and forms of subjectivity, and therefore qualifies as friendship. Second, gay S & M is not just a relationship between two sex partners – it is also a foundation for community. For example, Foucault describes the S & M ghetto in San Francisco as a place where sexual experimentation has formed a community with its own unique norms and social structure.[13] People have coalesced into an S & M scene, transforming a subversive sexual practice into a subversive community; a counter-culture based on participation in a particular kind of novel relationship. Foucault calls this "ghettoization."[14] In the case of gay S & M, this ghettoization is especially useful. Living in a society where homophobia is prevalent, and where discrimination and violence against homosexual people are widespread, the S & M counter-culture provides a space where, for once, gay people can set the conditions for social interaction. It is not just a space of refuge, but a space of greater freedom, in which people can create new identities for themselves, find community, and enrich their lives in ways that would not be possible anywhere else. This is another way in which gay S & M culture uses the creation of novel relationships as a means of resistance against the excessive normalisation encountered in the public realm.

However, Foucault's concept of friendship does not simply entail disconnection from society and the subversion of social norms in marginal spaces. It also entails a project of social activism that aims to challenge the excessive normalisation of relationships across society as a whole. The following quote, from an interview entitled "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," captures some of the nature of this project, as well as the excitement and sense of humour with which Foucault approaches it:

> [MF:] We should fight against the impoverishment of the relational fabric. We should secure recognition for relations of provisional coexistence, adoption....
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> GB: Of children.
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> MF: Or – why not? – of one adult by another. Why shouldn't I adopt a friend who's ten years younger than I am? And even if he's ten years older? Rather than arguing that rights are fundamental and natural to the individual, we should try to imagine and create a new relational right that permits all possible types of relations to exist and not be prevented, blocked, or annulled by impoverished relational institutions.[15]

Foucault thus expands the project of experimental friendship into a general challenge to the normalisation of relationships. If we take up this project, the narrow range of relationships available to us can be abandoned in favour of the cooperative and spontaneous construction of novel relationships. This will establish a more fluid way of being together that allows for

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[13]   Ibid. 167. Cf., David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 103-104.

[14]   Ibid.

[15]   Michel Foucault, "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 158.

greater diversity and creativity. Gay culture stands at the forefront of this project, since it is by necessity a privileged site for the creation of novel relationships. Interestingly, however, Foucault positions the general challenge to the normalisation of relationships as a substitute for the gay rights movement. The gay rights movement attempts to create a new scheme of relationships that incorporates homosexuality as a legitimate choice [choice?] of lifestyle, but for Foucault this project only confirms the validity of the systems of normalisation that govern relationships. As an alternative, he suggests that we fight against the very idea of a rigid and totalising code of norms for relationships in the name of freedom and experimentation. For this reason we might suspect that Foucault would have been ambivalent about the idea of legalising gay marriage. It seems that, given his understanding of homosexuality as a practice of experimental friendship, Foucault might have regarded the movement to legalise gay marriage as dangerous, because it threatens to "contaminate" homosexual relationships with the rigid norms typical of heterosexual relationships. This conjecture is supported by Foucault's argument that gay rights should be superseded by a "relational right." A relational right, for Foucault, means "the right to gain recognition in an institutional sense for the relations of one individual to another individual," as opposed to traditional civil rights which pertain only to the individual.[16] If a right of this kind were upheld, people who engage in unconventional relationships would be able to attain the same kind of recognition that married couples attain. The dangers inherent in legalising gay marriage would be avoided, or at least mitigated, by this approach. However, it is worth noting that it is a very unusual tack for Foucault, who tends to avoid using the language of rights and investing in institutionalised processes of social reform. It suggests that he has more sympathy for the traditional projects of political philosophy than is generally thought , although to what extent remains an open question, since he does not develop the argument further. What can be made of the notion of a relational right, and what normative limits would need to be placed on such a right, also remain open questions.

Foucault's idea of a general challenge to the normalisation of relationships resonates with the perceived threat of homosexuality to heterosexual culture. As we have seen, Foucault is not simply trying to undermine the particular code of norms governing relationships between men – he is disputing the normalisation of relationships in general. Homosexual culture, with its potential for experimentation and creativity, is therefore a threat to the stability of all relationships, and to the social order that these relationships support. We have seen how this threat is received by conservative commentators, who claim that the family is the "fundamental unit of society" and continuously assert that marriage is necessarily a relationship between a man and a woman. Their claims, supposedly supported by truths of biology and religion, are used to defend the hegemony of a relational tradition that marginalises and condemns homosexuality. Homophobia is therefore, at least in some cases, not so much a reaction based on moral condemnation of homosexual sex acts as it is a conservative attempt to secure the supposedly heterosexual foundations of society. For his part, Foucault welcomes the disruption of the social order because it is only through such disruption that we can rejuvenate the impoverished relational fabric of our society. He is also

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[16]   Ibid., 162. Cf., 160.

quite confident that the general challenge to the normalisation of relationships does not represent a true threat to the stability of society.[17]

Despite the urgency of this challenge to the excessive normalisation of relationships, Foucault warns against the idea of a homosexual program or agenda. A misplaced emphasis on solidarity and common goals, he suggests, can undermine the creativity that makes gay culture so significant.

> [T]he idea of a program of new proposals is dangerous. As soon as a program is presented, it becomes a law, and there's a prohibition against inventing. There ought to be an inventiveness to a special situation like ours and to these feelings, this need that Americans call "coming out," that is, showing oneself. The program must be wide open. We have to dig deeply to show how things have been historically contingent, for such and such reason intelligible but not necessary. We must make the intelligible appear against a background of emptiness and deny its necessity. We must think that what exists is far from filling all possible spaces. To make a truly unavoidable challenge of the question: What can be played?[18]

According to Foucault, homosexuality must provide a space for innovation and experimentation, allowing new forms of friendship to develop without the law-like influence of a "program of proposals." However, because of this openness, homosexual culture finds itself implicated in a social and political project but at the same time denied the option of resorting to devices such as a fixed group identity or a fixed agenda that are used to create cohesion and solidarity in other groups. In effect, the aim of challenging the relational fabric of society sits uneasily with the need for a clear, consistent and effective approach to social change, which would seem to require a unifying project. However, Foucault does not regard this as a severe problem, and appears hopeful that homosexual culture can maintain an awareness of its social and political relevance while not falling into the trap of building itself an inflexible program or engaging in identity politics. Perhaps, because it is flexible, diverse and locally organised, gay culture can mount a more successful and unexpected attempt at social change than other, more conventional movements.

Finally, it is important to remember that, although the general challenge to the normalisation of relationships begins with homosexual culture, anyone can participate. Even heterosexual relationships, if a certain inventiveness is employed, can be subject to experimentation. Indeed, much of the formality that comprises these relationships could, and perhaps should, be deprived of the semblance of necessity it has attained and re-evaluated with a sense of humour and creativity.[19] In light of this general questioning of the norms that structure our relationships, it might even be argued that it no longer makes sense to talk in terms of homosexual and heterosexual relationships, if what we mean by that is that these relationships both have their own intrinsic and immutable characteristics. Rather, we should talk about a multitude of *sui generis* relationships that are just, as it happens, between a man

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[17]   Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 261.

[18]   Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 139-140.

[19]   Michel Foucault, "The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will," 160.

and a woman, or between two women or two men, or between more than two people. This is what David M. Halperin means when he says that "The future Foucault envisages for us is not exclusively or categorically gay. But it is definitely queer."[20] Although the norms that determine our relationships are the products of millennia of history and are supported by very rigid systems of power relations, they ought to be challenged. Doing so will clear the space needed for an experimental friendship in which anyone can participate, regardless of their identifying themselves as gay, lesbian, straight or otherwise.

Foucault's work on homosexuality and social experimentation thus describes a novel form of friendship. This form of friendship is quite different from what we would call friendship in common language – it is not founded on similarity between friends, nor does it involve a fixed body of norms that determine how friends relate to one another. Instead, it involves the collaborative creation of new subjectivities and relationships as participants struggle to come to terms with one another. In this way it mirrors the efforts of many contemporary philosophers who wish to challenge traditional notions of friendship. Furthermore, like many contemporary contributions to the philosophy of friendship, Foucault's also has political implications, since it entails two distinct activist projects. First, there is a project of localised resistance to social normalisation. Foucault conceptualises friendship as taking place in marginal spaces that are disconnected from the intricate and totalising systems of power relations that would otherwise normalise our relationships. In these marginal spaces, new systems of power relations and subjectivities can be constructed in a collaborative way, and these relations and subjectivities can remain negotiable and flexible. Friendship thus subverts the most dangerous and normalising systems of power relations. Second, there is a large-scale project in which we challenge the excessive normalisation of relationships across society. Although the normalisation of relationships is one way in which the social order is maintained and perpetuated, it can be excessive and place undue restrictions on the kinds of relationships we have, as is demonstrated by the limitations of our tradition of friendship between men. The experimental friendship described by Foucault presents a much-needed challenge to this normalisation, and shows how we might go about rejuvenating the relational fabric of our society. Together, these two activist projects make Foucault's a unique and highly practical account of the potential of friendship to create and sustain social change.

If we look at this project closely, we can see that it parallels Foucault's interpretation of the Enlightenment, as given in the essay "What is Enlightenment?"[21] For Foucault, the Enlightenment is a phenomenon, a task and an obligation all at once. It is a historical *phenomenon* that consists in a widespread rejection of illegitimate authority and an opportunity to transform the public realm. It is also the *task*, to be undertaken at this specific point in history, of preparing for the free use of public reason and thereby expediting humanity's transition from superstitious and dogmatic "immaturity" to rational "maturity." Finally, it is the *obligation* to take advantage of the phenomenon of Enlightenment by carrying out the task of Enlightenment – that is, the obligation to bring humanity to a mature state by carrying out a

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[20]   Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 100.

[21]   Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 303-319.

reform of the public realm that promotes the free use of public reason. In much the same way, the social experimentation that Foucault sees as linked with homosexual culture is a composite of phenomenon, task and obligation. The phenomenon is the creation of new types of relationship, beginning in spaces where their relationships are subject to less normalisation. The task that comes out of this phenomenon is that of transforming the relational fabric of society. The obligation is to carry out this task and thereby mitigate the dangers presented by the excessive and harmful normalisation of relationships. The project of social experimentation that Foucault describes in his work on homosexuality is therefore quite similar to the project he outlines in the essay "What is Enlightenment?" In both cases we are given an opportunity, specific to this period in history, to transform society and create a new and better way of life. In the classical, Kantian Enlightenment, this involves setting up the conditions for rational public debate and thereby casting off despotism and religious dogma. With regards to friendship, it means setting up the conditions for an experimental and creative approach to relationships, and thereby freeing ourselves from the limits imposed by the impoverished relational fabric of society.

However, this project is quite distinct in character from the two projects that appear as complementary themes in Foucault's discussion of the Enlightenment. First, there is what Foucault calls the "Enlightenment attitude' – a process of social critique based on Kant's concept of the free use of public reason. Foucault's project of social experimentation is similar to the Enlightenment attitude in that it aims to transform society, but differs in that it is not concerned with the ameliorating the systems of power, knowledge and ethics that comprise society. Rather, it anticipates the creation of a number of marginal spaces that are only minimally connected to large-scale social structures. In other words, it is not a project of large-scale social critique, but one involving friendships and small communities. The other theme that appears in Foucault's discussion of the Enlightenment is that of an aesthetics of existence. Foucault develops this theme through a discussion of Baudelaire's dandyism. The social experimentation that Foucault calls friendship is similar to the aesthetics of existence in that it aims at the transformation of the self (indeed, Foucault suggests that his concept of friendship is a type of aesthetics of existence, since it involves an "art of life"[22]) but, unlike the aesthetics of existence described in works such as *The History of Sexuality*,[23] it is not simply a matter of self-transformation. Rather, it also involves the transformation of others through a negotiable and collaborative process of relationship construction. Foucault's concept of friendship is therefore quite similar to his work on the ancient practice of *parrhesia*,[24] in that it represents a move from a solitary aesthetics of existence toward a more collaborative aesthetics of

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[22]   Michel Foucault, "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," 161.

[23]   Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure.* Translated by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1992); *The History of Sexuality, Volume Three: The Care of the Self*, translated by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

[24]   Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982,* edited by Frédéric Gros et al, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). A useful commentary on this course is given by Thomas Flynn, "Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at Collège de France (1984)." *The Final Foucault*, edited by James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

existence.

There are therefore both important similarities to and important differences between the project of social experimentation found in Foucault's work on gay culture and his interpretation of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, both are presented as composites of phenomenon, task and obligation, and both anticipate processes of social change linked to specific moments in history. On the other hand, however, the project of social experimentation presented in Foucault's work on homosexuality differs from the Kantian project of social critique and the aesthetics of existence that are presented as the two complementary themes of the Enlightenment. Rather than conforming to the traditional dichotomy between individual self-transformation and societal transformation, Foucault's concept of friendship as social experimentation takes a middle path and focuses on small communities and friendships. This approach to social change has only gained currency quite recently, but it nonetheless bears the ethos of the Enlightenment – the notion that we have an opportunity, at this moment in history, to transform ourselves and our society in a fundamental way. We should therefore understand Foucault's work on homosexual culture as presenting a third, historically distinct aspect of the Enlightenment project, complete with a new model of social action that represents twentieth-century theoretical developments.

In conclusion, Foucault's work on homosexuality and friendship is certainly worth more attention than it has been given. There are several reasons why. First, it gives us a new concept of friendship, connected with two promising activist projects. This contribution is of particular relevance to contemporary debates on friendship in continental philosophy, which tend to focus on the relationship between friendship, difference and social norms. Second, Foucault's work on friendship supplements his interpretation of the Enlightenment by describing a form of social action focussed on the creation of novel relationships between friends and within small communities. This approach to social action is, for the most part, a twentieth-century achievement, and provides a middle path between the Enlightenment projects of large-scale social reform and an individualistic aesthetics of existence. Third, this work brings the aesthetics of existence, which is often described by Foucault as a solitary task, into a collaborative environment. Finally, on a biographical note, Foucault's work on homosexuality and friendship gives us an interesting insight into the connection between his intellectual work and his social activism. In fact, the work itself is a way of participating in social change by promoting homosexual culture and its challenge to the normalisation of relationships. It is perhaps the high point of activism in Foucault's writings.