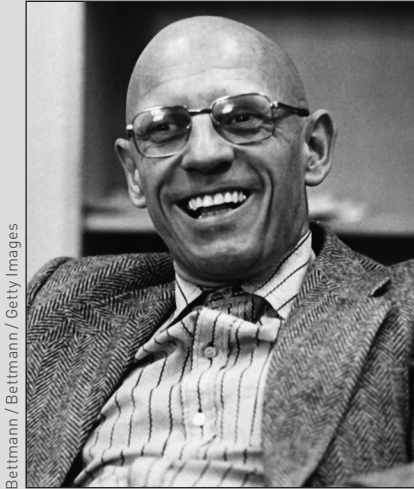


MICHEL FOUCAULT

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



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When he died of AIDS in 1984 at 57 years of age (Lemert, 2005a), “Michel Foucault was perhaps the single most famous intellectual in the world” (J. Miller 1993:13). That fame was derived from a fascinating body of work that has influenced thinkers in a number of different fields, including sociology. Foucault also led an extremely interesting life, and the themes that characterized his life tended to define his work as well. In fact, it could be argued that, through his work, Foucault was seeking to better understand himself and the forces that led him to lead the life that he led.

Among Foucault’s last works was a trilogy devoted to sex—*The History of Sexuality* (1980a), *The Care of the Self* (1984), and *The Use of Pleasure* (1985). These works reflected Foucault’s lifelong obsession with sex. A good deal of Fou-

cault’s life seems to have been defined by this obsession, in particular, his homosexuality and his sadomasochism. During a trip to San Francisco in 1975, Foucault visited and was deeply attracted to the city’s flourishing gay community. Foucault appears to have been drawn to the impersonal sex that flourished in the infamous bathhouses of that time and place. His interest and participation in these settings and activities were part of a lifelong interest in “the overwhelming, the unspeakable, the creepy, the stupefying, the ecstatic” (cited in J. Miller, 1993:27). In other words, in his life (and his work), Foucault was deeply interested in “limit experiences” (where people [including himself] purposely push their minds and bodies to the breaking point) such as the impersonal sadomasochistic activities that took place in and around those bathhouses. It was Foucault’s belief that it was during such limit experiences that great personal and intellectual breakthroughs and revelations became possible.

Thus, sex was related to limit experiences, and both, in turn, were related in his view to death: “I think the kind of pleasure I would consider as the real pleasure would be so deep, so intense, so overwhelming that I couldn’t survive it. . . . Complete total pleasure . . . for me, it’s related to death” (Foucault, cited in J. Miller, 1993:27). Even in the fall of 1983, when he was well aware of AIDS and the fact that homosexuals were disproportionately likely to contract the disease, he plunged back into the impersonal sex of the bathhouses of San Francisco: “*He took AIDS very seriously. . . . When he went to San Francisco for the last time, he took it as a ‘limit-experience’*” (cited in J. Miller, 1993:380).

Foucault also had a limit experience with LSD at Zabriskie Point in Death Valley in the spring of 1975. There Foucault tried LSD for the first time, and the drug pushed his mind to the limit: “The sky has exploded . . . and the stars are raining down upon me. I know this is not true, but it is the Truth” (cited in J. Miller, 1993:250). With tears streaming down his face, Foucault said, “I am very happy. . . . Tonight I have achieved a fresh perspective on myself. . . . I now understand my sexuality. . . . We must go home again” (cited in J. Miller, 1993:251).

Prior to his experience with LSD, Foucault had been hard at work doing the research for his history of sexuality. He planned to approach that work much as he had approached his

(Continued)