France

by Brett Farmer

France, the second largest nation in Western Europe, has a rich, if markedly ambivalent, relationship to glbtq people and cultures. One of the first nations to decriminalize same-sex activity, France has often been held up as a progressive model of sexual enlightenment. It has given the world many openly, high-profile glbtq artists, including Marcel Proust, André Gide, Colette, Jean Genet, Jean Cocteau, and Marguerite Yourcenar, among others, and has offered a haven for expatriates such as Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin, and Edmund White.

Yet, for all its liberalism, France has also exhibited a perceptible resistance--or, more to the point, an indifference--to the social specification and political empowerment of glbtq people. There are, for example, no national glbtq organizations in France and little political or legal recognition of glbtq people as a group.

In fact, the idea that glbtq people might form a minoritarian community with a distinct social identity has, until recently, been largely alien to French culture and has been seen--even by many queers--to run counter to traditional French social and political values.

Reading glbtq French History

To understand the distinctive status of glbtq people in France requires a brief reading of modern French history. As with any project of queer historiography, it is difficult to map glbtq French history because concepts of sexuality and sexual identity are culturally and historically specific. What the contemporary Anglo-American world may understand through our notions of glbtq sexuality does not have ready or easy equivalents in French history.

Nevertheless, there are some historians who forge a continuous and relatively unproblematic link between same-sex activity in French history and modern notions of homosexuality. Claude Pasteur, for instance, asserts that, as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Royal Court of France fostered an entrenched and well-developed male homosexual culture that included such significant figures as Louis XIII, Mazarin, and Philippe d'Orléans.

Top to bottom:
1) France and neighboring countries.
2) King Louis XIII.
3) Jules Mazarin.
4) Philippe d'Orléans.

Other historians, however, argue that these early formations of same-sex activity have a distinct social and erotic organization that renders them vastly different from modern categories of homosexuality. In her reading of the history of French female homoeroticism, Marie-Jo Bonnet contends that, while female same-sex activity may have occurred in varying degrees across French history, the notion of lesbianism as a specific category of sexuality did not come into full existence in France until the late nineteenth century and it would thus be anachronistic to read earlier instances of female homoeroticism as lesbian.

Vive la révolution

Most commentators agree, however, that, as with much modern French history, the Revolution of 1789 serves as a convenient, if artificial, starting point for considering the development of queer sexualities in France. The Revolution and its aftermath ushered in many of the central foundations of modern French society and thus many of its defining ideas and beliefs.

The Revolution's political overthrow of the *ancien régime*--the monarchical and ecclesiastical system of government that ruled France to that time--was accompanied by a correlative assault on received social and sexual orthodoxies. Influenced by the emergent philosophy of the Enlightenment, the dictates of Court and Church were abandoned for a new secular order of social and moral conduct grounded in rationalist individualism.

One of the precepts overthrown was the canonical proscription of sodomy and other "crimes against morality" that had been used routinely to suppress same-sex activity. The new French penal code of 1791 removed "pederasty"--the term used in France at the time to nominate homosexual acts, usually between men but sometimes also women--from its list of punishable offenses, effectively making France the first country in the world to decriminalize homosexuality.

This legal revision was further ratified with the formal adoption in 1810 of the famous *Code Napoléon* which legalized all sexual acts between consenting parties, regardless of their form, as long as they were conducted in private.

Private Sexuality / Public Citizenship

The accent on privacy is key to understanding how and why France adopted such a seemingly liberal response to homosexuality, as well as providing insight into developing French social attitudes.

Pederasty was decriminalized less out of a spirit of progressive tolerance for same-sex activity--indeed, the French were as homophobic as any other European culture of the time--than out of a commitment to Revolutionary ideals of egalitarian individualism. The prevailing view promoted by the Revolution was that all people were equal members of the new French Republic who should be entitled to maximum individual freedoms in their private lives as long as these did not impinge on others or the proper conduct of public citizenship.

The idea that one's private life should be separate from--and at all times subordinated to--one's public life of national and civic duty is an integral tenet of French social thought, actively enshrined in law (*Code civil, Article 9*), and it has widely shaped French attitudes to queer sexualities throughout the modern era.

Where the French judiciary, for instance, historically paid little or no heed to homosexual activity conducted behind closed doors, whether those of the private boudoir or commercial venue, they were rigorous in policing public manifestations of same-sex activity because these were deemed a gross offense against public decency and, thus, a threat to social stability.

It is argued that the traditional confinement of women to the private realm of the domestic sphere meant that lesbianism in France benefited particularly from the revolutionary tradition of privatized liberty. While certainly not immune from social regulation or homophobic censure, female homosexuality was, as Catherine van Casselaer notes, largely "able to avoid serious moral condemnation" throughout much of modern French history by remaining firmly private and "inhabiting the no-go areas between [the] ethical boundaries" of French society.

Given the staunchly patriarchal cast of French society, however, one wonders how much this apparent

inattention to lesbianism was due simply to the broader cultural devaluation of women and a general refusal to take seriously female sexuality at large.

Even today, while attitudes vary enormously, most French remain remarkably indifferent to people's sexuality, believing it to be something private and discreet. It is for this reason that the public disclosure of one's sexual orientation, whether in terms of a voluntary "coming out" or an enforced "outing," so central to Anglo-American glbtq politics, has not traditionally been an integral part of French life.

When, in 1999 for example, the Socialist politician, Bertrand Delanoë announced his homosexuality on national television--the first French politician ever to do so--the disclosure caused surprisingly little commotion at a national level other than to provoke a debate about the relevance of private issues to public politics.

The French Exception

Accompanying the relative French indifference to private sexualities is the corresponding idea of a universal public or national citizenship rooted in absolute common ideals. Frequently termed "the French exception" (*l'exception française*), it is the distinctly Gallic belief that everyone is, first and foremost, French, and that all else is secondary: "one nation, one people, one culture" (*une nation, un peuple, une culture*).

As a grounding model of social and political subjecthood, the philosophy of universal French exceptionalism has variable advantages and disadvantages for glbtq people. On the plus side, it has enabled important queer political gains. Most of the battles fought and advances made in French glbtq movements have been explicitly organized around claims for full and equal citizenship under French law.

Throughout the 1970s, a period of comparative radical activism in French queer politics, glbtq groups such as FHAR (Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action), GLH (Homosexual Liberation Groups), and CUARH (Anti-Homosexual Repression Urgency Committee) militated successfully against the only two statutes in French law to discriminate specifically between heterosexual and homosexual citizens: differential ages of consent and penalties for public sex.

More recently, glbtq activists helped pass the 1999 Civil Solidarity Pact (*Pacte Civil de Solidarité*), which removed legal distinctions between married and unmarried couples regardless of gender, effectively granting homosexual couples the same civil and economic rights as their straight counterparts. In all these political reforms, focus has been on glbtq people less as members of a specific community than as full citizens of the French republic with entitlement to the same rights as all others.

The principle of French exceptionalism equally presents potential liabilities for glbtq people. Its investment in a structure of universal assimilation to prescribed ideals curtails its ability to accommodate diversity-- whether sexual, cultural, or ethnic--other than as something to be integrated into the national whole. As such, it is a model of citizenship that arguably elides queer differences, accepting glbtq sexualities and people only to the extent that they conform to orthodox social norms.

The French cultural demand that all social groups subordinate their differences to a republican universalism also stymies the development of community and, by implication, collective political agency among French glbtq people.

Some commentators, for example, blame the tardiness and relative inefficiency of the French response to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s on a lack of queer communitarian organization. With little concept of themselves as a social collective and no real community infrastructure through which to mobilize politically and/or to disseminate safe sex information, French glbtq people, it is suggested, were ill equipped to deal with the onslaught of AIDS and, as a result, suffered greater losses than in many other European countries.

The Rise of Identity Politics

The 1980s, however, witnessed the start of an important shift in French glbtq cultures. As a response in equal parts to the AIDS crisis, the impact of transnational queer cultures, and the forces of global market capitalism, glbtq people in France fostered an increasing sense of themselves as a distinct community and started to organize accordingly.

The 1980s and 1990s saw, for example, the development of high-profile French gay and lesbian magazines such as *Gai Pied* and *Títu*; the popularization of queer community events such as annual Gay Pride Marches; the emergence of visible gay neighborhoods in large metropolitan centers; and the concomitant rise of a widespread, commercialized glbtq scene.

It must be noted, however, that these developments have been controversial and have met with considerable resistance, even from French glbtq people themselves. Many view the rise of queer communitarianism as a disruptive importation of American-style identity politics and multiculturalism that runs contrary to traditional French values.

In an influential critique first published in France in 1996, gay social commentator Frédéric Martel condemns the newly emergent glbtq communitarianism in France as a damaging "retreat . . . into a gay identity" that "valu[es] the minority at the expense of the national culture," and that thus threatens "to completely dismantle the French model of integrating individuals" into a unified republic.

Yet, as Martel also argues, it would be unwise to exaggerate the apparent rift between the identity "camp" and a more "universalist camp" in contemporary French glbtq life. Both form part of a "complex dialectic" that informs glbtq cultures and politics in variable ways.

How this dialectic will play out in the future is difficult to know. It may, as Martel opines, pass and "have no lasting hold on French society." It may equally give rise to a hybrid or "intermediate position" that combines queer "American communitarianism" and French exceptionalism, "multiculturalism and defense of the republican state."

What is certain is that, as always, France will continue to forge its own distinctive formations of glbtq sexuality that may correspond in some respects with those of Anglo-American societies but differ in many others.

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