

# The pre-Freudian modernization of sexuality: Krafft-Ebing and Freud

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My claim is that Freud's perspective on sexuality in general and his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*<sup>1</sup> in particular, should not be considered as a unique and revolutionary breakthrough, but as part of a broader development: the modernization of sexuality. A new understanding of sexuality began to take shape in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, which in its turn, came about against the background of wider historical developments. The groundwork was laid by some psychiatrists, in particular Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll. Their pioneering role has largely been forgotten, ignored or belittled, and therefore I will discuss the historical relevance of their work.<sup>2</sup>

Before explaining what I mean with the modernisation of sexuality and how their approach foreshadowed that of Freud, some remarks about the late nineteenth-century development of the psychiatric understanding of what at that time was labelled as perversion. And also some words about the background of Krafft-Ebing and Moll.

Traditionally sexuality had been mainly understood in moral-religious and legal terms, as either virtuous or sinful and criminal *behaviour*. The new psychiatric interest in sexuality was linked to forensic medicine that focused on criminal acts like rape, sodomy, and public indecency. Whereas physicians first argued that mental and nervous disorders *resulted* from improper sexual conduct, psychiatrists suggested that they were the *cause* of deviance. Their main thrust was that in many cases such behaviour should not be regarded as sin and crime, but as symptoms of pathology. From around 1870, under the influence of evolutionary and degeneration theory, psychiatrists shifted the focus from immoral acts to an innate morbid condition and the

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1905 and 1925 Freud published 6 editions of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. In these essays he elaborated three notions: 1. that sexual perversions throw light on the nature of sexuality in general and that there is no fundamental difference between 'normal' heterosexuality and sexual deviations in the sense that sexuality is not a natural, pre-given, unitary biological force, but that it is shaped, in developmental psychological processes, on the basis of a wide array of plastic component desires and impulses, which are subordinated to a specific dominant one; 2. that children are endowed with sexual feelings and desires and that any part of the body or any conceivable object can serve sexual gratification (polymorphous perversity); 3. the consolidation of sexual object choice and identity during puberty and adolescence.

<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons why psychoanalysis eventually overshadowed the contributions by Krafft-Ebing, Moll and some others (Iwan Bloch, Havelock Ellis), was that Freud developed a comprehensive theory, established a therapeutic school, acquired dedicated followers, and organized a movement implying disciplinary mechanisms to maintain unity and orthodoxy. Krafft-Ebing did not develop a coherent theory which could be adopted by students or followers. Moll did to some extent and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century he was a leading medical expert on sexuality, but he was an 'Einzelgänger' who did not teach at the university and who also lacked other institutional framework to attract students or followers.

personal characteristics of moral offenders, who should be treated as patients rather than punished as sinners or criminals.

Collecting and publishing more and more case histories they diagnosed, categorized, labelled, discussed and explained a wide range of perversions such as uranism, contrary sexual feeling, inversion, homo- and *heterosexuality*, exhibitionism, voyeurism, fetishism, paedophilia, sadism, and masochism.

Against this background both Krafft-Ebing and Moll articulated a new perspective, not only on perversion, but also on sexuality in general. In the mid-1880s, Krafft-Ebing initiated and in the 1890s Moll elaborated a shift from a psychiatric approach in which deviant sexuality was explained as a derived and episodic symptom of a more fundamental mental disorder, to a consideration of perversion as an integral part of an autonomous and continuous sexual instinct which deeply affected one's inner self and manifested itself in various forms.

As a professor at the universities of Graz and Vienna and working in many fields of psychiatry, Krafft-Ebing was one of the most prominent psychiatrists in Central Europe and a leading forensic expert. As one of the founding fathers of medical sexology he is remembered nowadays chiefly as the author of the bestselling *Psychopathia sexualis* and other works on sexual pathology. By naming and classifying virtually all non-procreative sexuality, he synthesized the new psychiatric knowledge about perversion.

Moll ran a private practice in Berlin as a neurologist and psychotherapist, and he established himself as an expert in forensic psychiatry, therapeutic hypnosis and suggestion and medical ethics. He also organized an international organisation and conference for sexology. His main works on sexuality are *Die Conträre Sexualempfindung*; *Das Sexuelleben des Kindes* and in particular *Untersuchungen über die Libido sexualis*<sup>3</sup>. The last work offered the most comprehensive and sophisticated theory on sexuality before Havelock Ellis completed his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* in 1910 and Freud published his *Drei Abhandlungen*. Moll anticipated several insights on sexuality later claimed by Freud and his followers to be their discoveries.

Krafft-Ebing and Moll were in touch with each other and exchanged case histories and opinions. Whereas Krafft-Ebing's work was largely an empirical collection of clinical observations and case studies, and his explanatory comments were rather fragmentary, Moll elaborated many of Krafft-Ebing's thoughts and devised a more systematic theory. Both criticized the criminalisation of sexual deviance, in particular homosexuality. Both also showed some appreciation for Freud's early work. Krafft-Ebing actively supported his application for a position at the University of Vienna, but they also passed identical criticism. Krafft-Ebing dismissed Freud's early seduction theory as a fairy-tale. According to Moll, Freud distorted his case histories and his patient's dreams in order to make them fit his theories, which, in Moll's view, were strongly colored by Freud's

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<sup>3</sup> *Libido sexualis*: 2 parts, but not 2 volumes. The promised second volume never materialized.

subjective preoccupations. In the light of some more recent demystifications of Freud, they had a point. The way Freud responded to Moll's criticism, by degrading Moll's personality and accomplishments, is certainly one of the less elevating episodes in the history of the psychoanalytic movement. For example, Freud's claim that he was the first to recognize the significance of infantile sexuality and his accusation that Moll had plagiarized him on this subject, was groundless.<sup>4</sup>

A significant similarity in Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's work is the prominent role of so-called 'perverts' as patients, correspondents and informants. Their work is full of case histories, which included many (auto)biographical accounts, letters and intimate confessions. Both Krafft-Ebing and Moll relied on the experiences and self-description of their clients as an empirical basis for their considerations. By publishing and quoting from letters and autobiographical accounts, they enabled voices to be heard that were usually silenced. Because they argued against traditional condemnations of sexual deviance as sin and crime, individuals approached them to find understanding and support. Many middle and upper-class men, who had contacted them of their own accord as private patients or corresponded with them in order to explain themselves and share their views with Krafft-Ebing and Moll, were given ample opportunity to speak for themselves. Several clients took advantage of the psychiatric model for their own purposes, to justify themselves, to develop a dialogue about their condition, and to criticize the stigmatizing of their sexual desires as criminal or pathological. It is striking that Krafft-Ebing and Moll did not force them into the straitjacket of established medical explanations. As more and more clients came up with stories that did not smoothly fit the current moral and medical viewpoint, Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's approach increasingly fluctuated between the explanation of perversion in terms of pathology and the recognition of the diversity of sexuality.<sup>5</sup> Against this background of interaction between Krafft-Ebing and Moll as experts on perversion and their articulate clients, the foundation was laid of a fundamental transformation of the definition and explanation of sexuality and of its meaning in human life.

There are five outstanding features of sexual modernity that can be found in Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's work, and that foreshadowed Freud's approach. The first concerns

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<sup>4</sup> There was already an interest in the sexuality of children in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The current view was that it was an abnormal, pathological symptom: healthy children did not show any sign of sexuality. Precocious sexual drives and activities in childhood were indicative of a congenital predisposition to perversion. Apart from Max Dessoir and Havelock Ellis, Moll was among the first to acknowledge that children showed sexual feelings and behavior and that this was normal and not a symptom of a pathological disposition. In this *Studies on Libido sexualis* discussed 'normal' childhood sexuality, not only in passing, but effectively in a systematic, theoretical way. He argued that undifferentiated sexual leanings, which could be perverted (homosexual, sadist, masochist tendencies) were part of a child's normal development long before the onset of puberty when a specific, object-oriented sexual desire emerged. Moll's 1908 study *Das Sexualleben des Kindes*, in which he repeated the main elements of his argument in his *Libido sexualis* and he added many case studies to substantiate his claims, was widely reviewed and praised in the national and international academic press as the first comprehensive scientific account of childhood sexuality. However, the book failed to make a long-term impact. (Difference between Moll and Freud: Freud conceptualized infantile sexuality more broadly: Moll rejected Freud's consideration of oral and anal-oriented activities as sexual.)

<sup>5</sup> Like Freud's theoretical elaborations on sexuality, Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's approach was full of contradictions and ambiguities.

the conceptualisation of sexuality as an inevitable and powerful natural force in human life. The second is about the classification of perversions and their relation to 'normal' sexuality. The third relates to the psychological understanding of sexuality. The fourth centres on the close connection between sexuality and personal identity. And the fifth refers to the shift from the reproductive norm to the pleasure as well as the relational dimension of sexuality. All five of these features imply that the modern experience of sexuality is permeated with ambiguities. Let me elaborate on these five features.

### **Sexuality as an inevitable, natural force**

While transferring sexuality from the realm of sin and crime to the domain of health and illness, Krafft-Ebing and Moll made clear that the sexual instinct, as a powerful and compulsive force, was an essential part of human nature. This is the steam-engine or pressure-cooker model of the sexual drive: it is viewed as a continuous building up of psychophysical energy, as an irresistible inner pressure that relentlessly seeks for release, whatever its object might be: another person, a body part, a fetishistic object or a particular scenario.

Closely connected to this model is the Janus face of sexuality as a highly complex, dangerous as well as wholesome, force, with which everybody has to come to terms. On the one hand, they underlined the current idea that the sexual urge posed a persistent threat to the moral and social order because of its barely controllable and sometimes explosive, destructive and bizarre nature. Worrisome, for instance, was Krafft-Ebing's claim that the sexual relation between man and woman was rooted in sadomasochism and evoked associations with rape, murder for lust, and even cannibalism.

On the other hand, they stressed that the fulfilment of sexual desire was significant for individual well-being, partnership and social bonds. In the descriptions of sexual activities, as they appeared in their case studies, the still prevailing reproductive norm was pushed into the background. Such an approach was rather new. Already before Freud, Krafft-Ebing and Moll questioned the biological-functionalist approach of sexuality that was rooted in age-old teleological and also modern Darwinian thinking. As far as sexual behaviour had an aim at all, it was physical pleasure as well as mental satisfaction and it also contributed to the forging of relationships.<sup>6</sup> Such a viewpoint foreshadowed modern sexual enthusiasm, the idea that every individual has a right, and perhaps even an obligation to sexual fulfilment, which, together with ideals of partnership, is an essential part of what we view as personal happiness.

Krafft-Ebing and Moll also acknowledged that sexual abstinence and dissatisfaction could be harmful to health and well-being. Thus they anticipated the dilemma which Freud elaborated in *Das Unbehagen an der Kultur*, that sexual restraint, considered as

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<sup>6</sup> Moll divided what he called the *libido sexualis* into two major more or less independent instincts: the individualistic and predominantly physical *Detumescenztrieb* simply aimed at discharge and the psychological and social *Contrectationstrieb*, which was the foundation for the emotional attraction to another individual.

an essential precondition for civilisation, at the same time may be unhealthy repression and lead to nervous and mental distress.

### **The classification of perversions and their relation to 'normal' sexuality**

The second feature of sexual modernism is about how the definition and classification of perversions undermined the differentiation between the normal and the abnormal. Several taxonomies of sexual deviance were developed in late nineteenth-century psychiatry, but the one devised by Krafft-Ebing and adopted by Moll, eventually set the tone in medical circles as well as in common sense thinking. Although they paid attention to a wide array of deviance, they distinguished four fundamental perversions. The first was contrary sexual feeling, that is various physical and psychological fusions of masculinity and femininity including what we now define as homo- and bisexuality, androgyny, transvestism and trans-sexuality. The second was fetishism, the erotic obsession with certain body-parts, objects or scenarios. The third and fourth were sadism and masochism, terms actually coined by Krafft-Ebing.<sup>7</sup>

A striking feature of their extensive discussion of these basic perversions was a shift away from their classification within clear boundaries to an understanding of 'normal' sexuality in the context of aberrations and the other way around. They foreshadowed the Freudian notion that the 'libido' consisted of 'component drives' and that a fixed sexual orientation was shaped in developmental stages through specific, either regular or irregular, conversions of various impulses.<sup>8</sup> Krafft-Ebing explained, for example, that sadism and masochism were inherent in normal male and female sexuality, the former being of an active and aggressive and the latter of a passive and submissive nature. Also fetishism was part and parcel of normal sexuality, Krafft-Ebing and Moll argued, because individual taste in sexual attraction and, connected to that, monogamous love, were grounded in a distinct preference for particular physical and mental characteristics of one's partner. In addition, their extensive discussion of several forms of gender inversion highlighted the gradual and chance character of sex differentiation. Exclusive masculinity and femininity and the associated predetermined sexual orientations appeared to be mere abstract generalisations. Since reproduction lost its weight as the touchstone for differentiating normal and abnormal sexuality in their work, their approach fluctuated between the labelling of perversion as pathology and the recognition of the great diversity of desires.

Another striking feature of their work was the highlighting of hetero- and homosexuality as the basic sexual categories. This was closely connected to their shifting perspective

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<sup>7</sup> Some of Krafft-Ebing's neologisms, such as sadism, masochism, and paedophilia are still used today. Both terms homosexuality and heterosexuality, which had been introduced in 1869, but were not in current use during the late nineteenth century, were reintroduced by Krafft-Ebing as well as by Moll around 1890.

<sup>8</sup> In this context Moll argued that frequent sexual activities in childhood, including masturbation, homosexuality and even fetishist, sadistic or masochistic tendencies, were not necessarily symptoms of perversion. The normalcy of infantile sexuality, according to Moll, should be understood in the context of psychosexual development, in which the transition in puberty from an undifferentiated to a differentiated stage was crucial.

from the traditional distinction between procreative and non-procreative acts to the relational dimension of sexuality. Krafft-Ebing's use of the term heterosexual, meaning sexual attraction between a male and a female free from a reproductive goal – and as such initially considered as a perversion – prepared the ground for viewing hetero- and homosexuality as equivalents and identifying other perversions as derived sub-variations of this more fundamental division. This view was shared by Moll. In this way they prefigured that the gender of one's sexual partner – the other (hetero), the same (homo) or both (bi) – would become the dominant feature of the modern sexual configuration, and not so much more specific preferences for other characteristics of one's sexual partner, or for certain objects, activities and scenarios. If such a fetishist framework for understanding sexual diversity would have set the tone, our sexual configuration might have been different from what it is nowadays.<sup>9</sup>

### **The psychological understanding of sexuality**

Another crucial feature of sexual modernisation was the eclipse of the dominant naturalist approach by a more psychological one. Before the late nineteenth century the term sexual had been current in relation to the typical characteristics of the body and behaviour of males and females. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century the term began to be used to indicate a more intricate complex of physical features, behaviours, desires and passions. This new meaning was advanced by the late-nineteenth century shift in psychiatry from a biomedical perspective stressing physical processes to one that viewed perversions as functional disorders of an instinct that could not be reduced to the body. More and more attention focused on the mental aspects of what was now called sexuality.

Although both Krafft-Ebing and Moll speculated about the location of the sexual drive in the nervous system and brain and situated the underlying causes of perversion in heredity and degeneration, all of this was of minor relevance in their interaction with clients. Largely as an effect of the prominent position of case histories and the voices of their clients, the biomedical perspective receded into the background. Not so much the body or behaviour as such were decisive in the diagnosis of perversion, but personal history, thoughts, feelings, perception, desires, imagination, fantasies, and dreams. Sexual desire was more and more located in a psychological disposition that was at least partly shaped by the social and cultural environment, by sensorial and mental stimuli, memories, storytelling, habits and cultural trends.<sup>10</sup> Mental processes behind

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<sup>9</sup> The late-nineteenth-century French psychologist Alfred Binet, for example, considered fetishism as the fundamental perversion that included all the aberrations by which sexual desire had fixed itself on the wrong, that is non-reproductive, goal.

<sup>10</sup> In this way in particular Moll foreshadowed Freud's understanding of sexuality, not as a natural given, but as shaped by mental processes that mediate erratic biological drives and cultural prerequisites. Sexuality is the realm where biological possibilities of the body are interpreted and acquire psychological meaning. Sexuality is shaped by the mediation of bodily impulses through unconscious psychological processes which bear the stamp of cultural meanings and language. Sexual desires are mental images and are based on a memory trace in the form of mental images of past experiences of satisfaction which give rise to phantasy and which are mediated by signs and language.

outward appearance and behaviour, partly, in Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's own words, 'unconscious' or 'latent' ones, were crucial for the determination of sexual orientation.<sup>11</sup> A hermeneutic epistemology of depth became the way to make sense of sexuality: the visible surface of the body and behavior were viewed as signs of something hidden and more essential, the individual subject's interior or 'true self'. Sexual expressions, whether physical, mental or linguistic, were to be subjected to endless psychological interpretation – and I would add sometimes fantastic over-interpretation - of which Freud's theory is, of course, the outstanding example.

In Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's work, sexuality thus emerged as a complex of reflexes, bodily sensations, behaviours, experiences and mental processes, in which the physical and psychological dimensions interacted with each other. As such, sexuality has indeed become a meaningful and sensitive experience for modern man, giving cause to an array of emotional problems such as anxious self-scrutiny, fears of being abnormal, worries about sexual attractiveness and achievement, and conflicts between personal desires and social roles, and between fantasies and mundane realities. Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's autobiographical case histories demonstrated that sexuality had become the subject of ceaseless and detailed self-analysis. On the one hand, self-reflection had a redeeming effect since it enabled self-awareness and self-expression, and later sexual emancipation. On the other hand, endless brooding more often than not implied uncertainty, uneasiness, inner struggle and frustration.

### **The close connection between sexuality and personal identity**

Closely related to the psychological dimension of sexuality is its strong link to personal identity. With respect to sexual deviance, late nineteenth-century psychiatry shifted the focus from a passing digression from the norm to a continuous and essential feature of one's inner being. The psychiatric discourse and the case history method in particular, reflected as well as shaped the experience of sexuality as the quintessence of the individual self. Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's perspective offered a public forum to individuals concerned for articulating their sexual desires and experiences in the form of a personal and autobiographical narrative. Many of them appealed to ideals of authenticity and sincerity to comprehend and justify themselves, and to give coherence to their troubled self. In this context the psychiatric case history and the sexual autobiography overlapped. Both are patterned and selective narrative reconstructions of past individual life from the perspective of the (often troubled) present. Both facilitated the belief that sexual desire and behaviour express something deep and fixed from within the inner self. This presupposition is of course not real in an ontological sense, but it is a just a way to make sense of sexuality. It has become part of our common-sense perception and as such it is still wide-spread in our culture. Although academic scholars, in the wake of Foucault, have again and again criticised the notion that sexual identity is fixed in the self, in our society it is very much experienced as an essence that is already there, waiting to be discovered, explored, understood, expressed, liberated and emancipated. Sexologists, psychotherapists, self-help guides, emancipation movements, the mass media and popular psychobabble have only intensified the

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<sup>11</sup> Moll claimed that dreams were one of the most reliable indicators of particular sexual inclinations.

preoccupation with sexuality as a focal point of the authentic self, of personal awareness, and self-actualisation.

As narrative scripts on which individuals could model their life history, Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's case histories also linked individual introspection and social identification. Their cases reflected and also promoted the emergence of a new experience of sexuality that was closely bound up with the appearance of new kinds of individuals and their grouping into sub-cultural communities, of which several of their clients, especially homosexuals, testified. They not only voiced a comfort of togetherness, but some of them also expressed a critical awareness of the social suppression of their sexuality, and thus the seeds of emancipation were sown.

### **From the procreative norm to the pleasure and relational dimension of sexuality**

The move in psychiatry from a forensic and biomedical focus to sexual psychology entailed that sexuality was increasingly detached from reproduction and that the satisfaction of desire came to the fore. From this it was only a small step to the Freudian conceptualisation of the 'libido' and 'pleasure principle', in which desire's only built-in aim is its own satisfaction. In Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's work, in their case histories in particular, the sexual impulse already began to appear as a pleasure wish that yearned neither for reproduction nor for intercourse per se, but only for fulfilment, that is the release of tension through orgasm.

However, Krafft-Ebing and Moll did not propagate a mere pursuit of physical pleasure. Just like Freud, they did not follow the potentially radical consequences of their insights. They suggested a new aim of sexuality by replacing negative attitudes towards unprocreative sexuality for a positive evaluation of its relational dimension. The affective longing for physical and psychological union with a partner, the ideal of romantic love, appeared as a purpose in itself. Both love without sex and sexual pleasure without affection, tenderness and attachment, were considered as incomplete. By stressing that the fulfilment of sexual desire was important as the glue of love, Krafft-Ebing and Moll anticipated the increasing sexualisation of love and marriage in the twentieth century as well as a more accepting attitude towards homosexuality.

It was exactly Krafft-Ebing's appreciation of sexuality's relational potential that contributed to his changing view of homosexuality as the equivalent of heterosexuality rather than as pathology - which Moll then largely adopted. Many homosexuals who expressed themselves in their case histories made clear that partnership was as important to them as sexual gratification. Moll stressed that the manner in which they experienced sexual passions as well as love was in no way different from the feelings of heterosexuals.

The prominent position they gave to hetero- and homosexuality as the fundamental sexual categories underlined the shift from a biological-functionalist conception of the sexual impulse as a reproductive instinct towards a view that emphasized erotic desire and pleasure in the context of affection, relationships and personal fulfilment. In this respect, homosexuality appeared to be fundamentally different from other perversions,



such as fetishism, masochism and sadism, and nowadays of course above all paedophilia. In contrast to homosexuality, it was difficult to gear the latter perversions to relational values such as intimacy, privacy, equality, reciprocity, and psychological rapprochement. These values also imply that sexuality was burdened with all the psychological complexities of love relationships and the other way around. The marriage between lust and love, involving very different and sometimes contradictory needs and emotions, is not always a stable and happy one.

I have come to my conclusion. The modern sexual configuration replaced some basic traditional patterns of sexuality. In traditional, collectively and hierarchically organised society, sexuality was largely embedded in a fixed moral order. As a function of social and moral behaviour, it had no distinct existence, but was instrumentally integrated in marriage, kinship, fixed gender roles, social status and economic concerns. Sexual morality was dominated by a reproductive imperative: the crucial differentiation was between legitimate procreative sex within marriage and immoral acts that interfered with it, such as adultery, sodomy or masturbation. Also, in a society in which most people were not individuals in the modern sense, personal sentiment and attraction were of minor importance to the calculus of economic security and family- and social interests in choosing a partner.

The psychiatric understanding of perversion, as articulated by Krafft-Ebing, Moll and also Freud, indicated that in the modern Western world sexuality dissociated itself from other social domains. It began to generate its own meanings as a distinct impulse with its particular psychological mechanisms, which became associated with profound and complex human emotions and anxieties. All of this emerged not only from psychiatric (or psychoanalytic) thinking in itself. First, to a large extent, the modernist interpretation relied on the self-observations of lay people who interacted with psychiatry and who were able and often very willing to share their sexual life-stories with medical and psychological experts such as Krafft-Ebing, Moll and Freud. Both parties were agents of culture at large, or at least bourgeois culture; until this day the dominant Western perspective of sexuality is to a large extent determined by middle class values. Second, the modern experience of sexuality was rooted in more general and longer-term social and cultural developments, such as the rise of the nuclear family and romantic love, individualisation, psychological self-understanding and autobiographical self-analysis in bourgeois circles, as well as social democratisation<sup>12</sup>, social and geographical mobility, urbanisation, growing affluence and the promotion of and quest for enjoyment in consumer capitalism. Such social and cultural trends advanced the emergence of sexuality as a separate and largely internalized sphere in human life. Only at that point was it feasible to define it as a distinct impulse located in the inner self, and to explore its operation. And only at that point it became possible to liberate and emancipate sexuality from what people increasingly began to experience as its social suppression.

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<sup>12</sup> Sex and consumption being modes of expressing freedom that could be allowed as long as others, political and economic, were contained. Freud fashioned a psychology of the normal for the liberal-democratic order: individualism, worry about yourself, not about the external world. Individuals are made to believe that the game was not in the outside world, in society, but in the inner self.