
DOI: 10.1111/1600-0498.12183

Sexual politics and feminist science: Women sexologists in Germany 1900–1933

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Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press and Cornell University Library, 2018, 377 pp.

In the early 20th century, Berlin and Vienna were at the forefront of sexual science and reform. The work and professional activism of physicians such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Albert Moll, Iwan Bloch, Albert Eulenburg, Max Marcuse, and Magnus Hirschfeld have been covered widely in older and more recent historiography. Anxieties about modernization triggered the carving out of sexology as a scientific field. Many reformist initiatives in civil society targeted issues of sexuality and gender: prostitution, venereal diseases, homosexuality, and other “perversions,” as well as the perceived crisis in gender roles and its impact on marriage, family, and motherhood. Middle-class feminists and female scholars played a crucial role in this social activism and some of them were sexologists in their own right, even though their work was largely ignored or dismissed by their male colleagues. Because this work has been treated poorly by historians, Kirsten Leng’s *Sexual Politics and Feminist Science* is a welcome contribution to the history of sexuality. Her book saves many fascinating thinkers and activists from oblivion, including Ruth Bré, Johanna Elberskirchen, Henriëtte Fürth, Sofie Lazarsfeld, Rosa Mayreder, Grete

Meisel-Hess, Anna Rüling, Helene Stöcker, and Mathilde Vaerting. Leng's detailed and nuanced analysis of their writings shows how their viewpoints challenged the gender-biased perceptions of male sexologists, who considered women merely as object rather than as subject of scientific rationality, and largely excluded them from their professional organizations, editorial boards, and conferences. At the same time, however, the liberating and emancipatory potentials of the feminist perspective were confounded by epistemic and sociopolitical assumptions, which, at least from today's perspective, evoke mixed feelings. Although, according to Leng, the Foucaultian view of sexology as a typical instrument of disciplinary biopower is one-sided, her study at the same time highlights its deep involvement in biopolitics.

Making claims about the personal as being political, most of the female sexologists belonged to the radical wing of the feminist movement. For them, economic independence and full citizenship were essential preconditions for sexual self-determination. They attacked the inequities of the Christian and bourgeois-capitalist sexual order, questioned the double standard for men and women and the related tacit tolerance of prostitution, and denounced the stigmatization of unmarried mothers. They demanded recognition of extramarital relationships, the legalization of contraceptives and abortion, equal rights for children born out of wedlock and social support for all mothers. The female sex drive was as strong and active as the male one, they argued, and it did not only serve reproduction and motherhood, but also physical and mental fulfilment.

Reversing the established view of male sexuality as the standard, these feminist thinkers idealized female sexuality as self-controlled and benevolent, whereas they pictured male sexuality as primitive, selfish, irresponsible, and often aggressive, if not sadistic. The biological, social, and ethical superiority of female sexuality was beyond doubt: women rather than men were pivotal in procreation and human evolution, and their mindful way of selecting a sexual partner was more altruistic than blind male lust. Some women sexologists believed that male and female sexuality were fundamentally incommensurable and favored homosexual relationships, but most of them, although asserting that male supremacy had poisoned heterosexuality, believed that relations between the sexes could and should be improved on the basis of individual choice, equal moral standards, a separation of sexuality and procreation, mutual love and sexual satisfaction, and the elevation of sexuality to a higher spiritual level implying a commitment to sincerity and monogamy.

Feminist sexologists agreed that a social and ethical transformation of gender relations and sexuality were indispensable, but they differed about the priorities and the direction of change. Views of hetero- and homosexuality and the importance of motherhood, for example, diverged. Some of them propagated a leading role for lesbians, who combined the qualities of both sexes and contributed to social and intellectual progress on the basis of their non-involvement in reproduction and motherhood. In their view, the average woman lacked masculine assets such as rational intelligence and was destined for marriage and childbearing, and therefore incapable of full rights and freedoms. Most feminist thinkers, however, rather sidelined homosexuality and insisted that women's capacity for motherhood qualified them for crucial functions and moral leadership in health care, public hygiene, social work, and education. Although female sexologists strongly opposed the social restrictions usually implied in women's reproductive involvement, at the same time most of them believed that women – provided they were healthy and “racially fit” (p. 195) – had the duty to bear children. Claiming not to seek sexual emancipation out of a selfish desire for unbridled freedom, these sexologists insisted that putting control over sexual relations and reproduction in women's hands was in the collective interest.

The feminist advocacy of sexual self-determination for women was guided by a profound commitment to an ethics of social responsibility, which prioritized health and fitness. Leng underlines that female sexology's entanglement with eugenics was at least as intensive as that of its male counterpart. Infused with hierarchical thinking about life as either valuable or not, this approach upheld the importance of robust motherhood for the vigor of the nation. Linking women's reproductive and sexual rights to racial hygiene and national regeneration provided social esteem and political capital, in particular in connection to the First World War, which boosted the importance attached to the quantity and quality of the population and which increased state-interference with gender-relations, sexuality, and reproduction. All of this implied that the sexual ethics propagated by feminist thinkers was exclusionary. They catered to educated, healthy, self-controlled, and socially responsible middle-class women who were capable of conscious and independent decision-making, presenting it as obvious that the reproduction of the unfit should be discouraged or prevented.

Leng's characterization of early 20th-century sexology and sexual reformism as a "confounding blend of possibility and constraint" (p. 267) concurs with recent historical scholarship that draws attention to the multifarious and contradictory trends in sexual modernity. Female sexologists' sophisticated interpretations of sexual and gender relations in terms of broader socio-economic and political structures, and their claim that the biological body should not limit woman's social role and rights, also came with inconsistencies and drawbacks. Whereas they undermined naturalist thinking by pointing out that sociocultural forces and inequalities of power shaped gender norms and roles, at the same time they sustained binary gender differences, biological explanations of sexuality, and the belief in the naturalness of heterosexuality and motherhood. Women's sexological work shared with its established male equivalent a firm reliance on science in general and biology and medicine in particular. Influenced by evolutionary and degeneration thinking and new discoveries in venereology, dermatology, gynecology, and endocrinology, this approach tended toward biological reductionism. Falling into the trap of the naturalistic fallacy, it assumed that "nature" provides an authoritative moral standard, thus establishing health, fitness, and biological improvement as the self-evident arbiter of the truth about and evaluation of sexual behavior. In her conclusion Leng critically addresses the recent embracing of evolutionary theory and neuroscience by some feminist scholars who pursue emancipatory policies on the basis of the assumption that bodies possess an innate political meaning and potential. Their logic echoes the approach of early 20th-century female sexologists – a parallel that raises questions about the continuing appeal of naturalist thinking and its possible dubious implications.

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