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Shaping Sexual Identity in Weimar Republic Germany

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History 310: History of the Body

Dr. Nuñez

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The Weimar Republic, existing from 1919 to 1933, has conventionally been seen by scholars as a time of sexual discovery. In general, the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an increase in the formalized study of sexuality, called sexology. This was nowhere more prominent than in Germany where notable sexologists like Magnus Hirschfeld and Richard von Krafft-Ebing carved out their professions. In addition to providing terms and medical explanations for forms of attractions outside of the understood norm, the works of sexologists that emerged and gained distinction during this time featured progressive – albeit limited – ideas that worked to legitimize the existence of same-sex desires. Sexology and the work of sexologists gave an authority to the discussion on sexual identity, and this authority allowed for, to use the language of Michel Foucault, an explosion in discourse.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, scholars have come to consider Germany as the origin of what Foucault refers to as the modern sexual identity. However, more recent scholars have questioned the sole impact of sexology in the formation of this identity, pointing to both social and cultural influences. Both sexology as well as social and cultural influences contributed to the rise of a modern sexual identity, and it is important to examine the interplay between the learned, scientific understanding of same-sex desire and that of lived, personal experiences. This paper will examine the work of sexologists and the personal accounts from individuals with same-sex desire to illuminate how the themes of sexuality worked to shape a specific discourse unique to the time leading up to, during, and soon after the Weimar Republic's demise. The discourse on homosexuality, as it came to be, was not limited to the formalized understandings of sexual identity by sexologists and instead also had real life implications based off of individuals' experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: A Division of Random House, Inc., 1990), 17.

Crucial to the “creation” of the modern sexual identity was the manifestation of a common language, including definitions and terms. It was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that sexologists began to classify and label the existence of individuals attracted to members of their own sex. Significantly enough, the word “homosexuality” came out of Germany in 1869.<sup>2</sup> Other terms were also present and used. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs favored the term “Uranians,”<sup>3</sup> Edward Carpenter favored “intermediate sex,”<sup>4</sup> as a kind of third sex, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing favored both “homosexual” and “sexual inverts”<sup>5</sup>. Each term had similar meanings and gave individuals a language to refer to themselves. As Robert Beachy writes, “The love that dared not speak its name, as Oscar Wilde put it, had many names, at least in German.”<sup>6</sup> Individuals were given terms to define themselves, which would have created the opportunity for them to consider themselves part of a certain group with specific characteristics and attributes. However, the medical terms were not the only ones in existence. Everyday speech and vocabulary specific to sex was, as Florence Tamagne writes, “appropriated by homosexual speakers who void[ed] them of their usual meanings, deform[ed] them and transform[ed] them to the point of using them as a basis for defining their own identity.”<sup>7</sup> In Germany, these included, *Schwule*, which meant sultry or warm, and more derogatory terms like *Tunte*<sup>8</sup>. The conception of language has shown to be an

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Beachy, "The German Invention of Homosexuality," *The Journal of Modern History* 82, no. 4 (2010): 804, accessed April 18, 2018, doi: 10.1086/656077.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Carpenter, “The Intermediate Sex,” in *Sexuality Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Carpenter, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, “Psychopathia Sexualis,” in *Sexuality Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Beachy, “The German Invention of Homosexuality,” 806.

<sup>7</sup> Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris, 1919-1939* (New York, NY: Algora Publishing, 2004), eBook, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Tamagne, 40.

important part of formulating what it meant to have same-sex desire from both a medical and social standpoint. Language implemented a framework for those with same-sex desire to understand their characteristics and interests, providing a way to define themselves.<sup>9</sup> However, despite the explosion of both scientific and popular terms, it was the former that gained more attention and authority. Sexologists like Ulrichs were ultimately the ones that, as Beachy puts it, “spearhead a conceptual revolution that transformed erotic, same-sex love from an idea of deviant acts into a full-blown sexual orientation with its own distinct quality and character.”<sup>10</sup>

The works of sexologists authenticated homosexuality – to use the predominant term of time – as something inborn in human biology and psychology. Sexologists relied on new medical knowledge to make their conclusions, notably the study of embryology. Because of this, they presented and defended same-sex attraction via medical science, which worked to remove it from the moral debate. The emphasis on science holds true in sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld’s description of homosexuality:

Modern research, based on the biological law that the opposite sex is latent in every individual, has elaborated the following formula: In every living being born of the union of two sexes, the characteristics of one sex are to be identified to varying degrees alongside those of the other. The key to this formula derives from a fact discovered by embryological science in the previous century. [...] It is therefore a fact that homosexuality is an inborn condition, that is, a matter of constitution.<sup>11</sup>

The conception of homosexuality as an innate condition had several effects. According to Carpenter, the study of sexology drew attention to the predominance of those attracted to the same sex. This attention familiarized same-sex desire in public discussion. It also emphasized,

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, “Sexual Catastrophes,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 701.

Carpenter argues, that these individuals were not in some way sexually perverted as had been previously considered.<sup>12</sup> Sexologists' works ultimately added validity to the existence of same-sex desire.

Sexologists soon turned their attention to the legal treatment of homosexuality in Germany. Following the idea that same-sex desire was congenital and natural, they believed that homosexuality should not be criminalized based on morality alone. In particular, sexologists concentrated on the eradication of Paragraph 175. Paragraph 175 was the German criminal code that made sexual acts between men a crime. Sexologists pushed for the abolishment of Paragraph 175 through scientific and medically related defenses. For example, following his description of homosexuality, Hirschfeld writes, "If one carries this thought process through to the conclusion that homosexuality is a natural, in-born disposition, then the moral condemnation of homosexuality can be regarded as an injustice and Paragraph 175 of the criminal code as a remnant of medieval conceptions."<sup>13</sup> Beyond making the discussion on homosexuality possible, sexologists sought to have it recognized formally by law. The Scientific Humanitarian Committee, for example, worked to end Paragraph 175. The SHC was founded in Berlin in 1897 by Magnus Hirschfeld, and it worked towards reforming the legal code through educating the public on scientific research. The organization's goal was to Beachy writes, "effect a dramatic cultural reassessment of homosexuality within Germany."<sup>14</sup> While the recognition was not realized, it did create a lot of activist work and discussion.

One of such individuals that was spurred by the work of sexologists was Anna Rueling. She was involved in the homosexual and women's movements in Berlin, and she was a strong

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<sup>12</sup> Carpenter, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Hirschfeld, 701.

<sup>14</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 86.

contender for the abolishment of Paragraph 175 and other discriminatory laws. In her speech for the annual conference of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in 1904, Rueling advocated for the inclusion of homosexual rights into the women's movement. She believed that the two spheres were interconnected and could work together to "find justice and recognition and to abolish the injustice against which they now struggle."<sup>15</sup> In her speech, Rueling is concerned with the limited space for women in the discussion of sexual identity, citing that women tended to not take priority in the homosexual movement because they were not criminalized as men were by Paragraph 175. Uranian women, she argues, still had significant roles in the debate as they were still affected by the social stigma against same-sex desire.<sup>16</sup> Because of this, she calls for an alignment between the women's and homosexual movements:

The women's movement fights for the right of individuality and self-determination. It must admit that the alienating ban that society still places on Uranians suppresses this right; and therefore its responsibility is to join the homosexuals in their struggles [...] as they fight for freedom and right, battling against old, false, and traditional concepts of a morality which is in actuality an immorality of the worst kind.<sup>17</sup>

Evident by the quotation, there is a strong emphasis on the right to identify oneself.

Understandably, self-determination is important in the shaping of the modern sexual identity. As a result, the activism that took place in Germany was significant in placing the formation of homosexuality inside of the Weimar Republic.

In addition to activism, understanding same-sex desire as an inborn condition created academic discussion and study on what attributes were genetic or psychological indicators for

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<sup>15</sup> Anna Rueling, "What Interest Does The Women's Movement Have In the Homosexual Question" in *Lesbian-Feminism in Turn-of-the-Century Germany*, ed. and trans. Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Eriksson (United States: The Naiad Press Inc., 1980), 82.

<sup>16</sup> Rueling, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Rueling, 90.

homosexuality. A central concept was the idea of sexual inversion. Fitting with Hirschfeld's earlier description of homosexuality, sexual inversion was the idea that gay men had an inverted feminine nature and women a masculine one. Sexual inversion was originally popularized by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who many scholars consider the instigator of the study of sexology. Ulrichs believed that individuals with same sex desire were part of a third-sex where, in the case of men, a feminine nature was trapped in a male body.<sup>18</sup> Ulrich was not a trained scientist or doctor, and instead developed his theory from the idea of animal magnetism combined with classical philosophy and human embryo development.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, Ulrichs' understanding of homosexuality was impacted by his own experience as someone with same-sex desire. As a result, his medical writings reflect his own perspective in addition to his learned knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Because experience and knowledge influenced his understanding of sexual inversion, as it did others, a definitive line cannot be drawn between the "learned" texts of sexologists and those of "realized" personal accounts. Instead, there is an evident interaction between the two spheres. The work of sexologists was impacted by the observed and lived experiences of those with same-sex desire, and, vice versa, those with same-sex desire defined themselves by the theories made by sexologists. Both played a part in identifying the characteristics of homosexuality, significantly in how it related to the concept of sexual inversion.

Sexologists saw sexual inversion as a symptom of the innate condition of homosexuality. In general, men were the focus of the discussion as they were more likely to be punished by Germany's penal code and finding a justification for their behavior more important. Women,

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<sup>18</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Clayton John Whisnant, *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880-1945*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), eBook, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 15.



however, were also discussed. Of women with sexual inversion Krafft-Ebing writes, “The masculine soul, heaving in the female bosom, finds pleasure in the pursuit of manly sports, and in the manifestations of courage and bravado. There is a strong desire to imitate the male fashion and [...] under favourable circumstances even to don male attire and impose in it.”<sup>21</sup> His writing shows how the actions and preferences of those with same-sex desires were seen as revealing something larger about the innate “condition” of homosexuality. Some sexologists took the idea of sexual inversion further by connecting it to bisexuality. Otto Weininger, for example writes, “There are no inverts who are completely sexually inverted. In all of them there is from the beginning an inclination to both sexes; they are, in fact bisexual. [...] Homo-sexuality is merely the sexual condition of these intermediate sexual forms that stretch from one ideally sexual condition to the other sexual condition.”<sup>22</sup> In both of these cases, sexual inversion explains the behavior and desires of individuals with same-sex desire as part of their innate conditions. Because of this, sexologists generally offered a scientifically-rooted analysis.

Personal accounts of individuals with same-sex desire were not tied up in theory or scientific knowledge, but they did interact with the work of sexologists. There were many instances where the lived experiences of individuals with same-sex desires matched the characteristics of sexologists’ understanding of sexual inversion. This was illustrated in the examples that the sexologist used from patients and in studies to make their conclusions. In Havelock Ellis’ study of sexual inversion, he discusses both male and female inversion, using their own words and quotes to build his claims. In his personal account to Ellis, an anonymous

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<sup>21</sup> von Krafft-Ebing, 47.

<sup>22</sup> Otto Weininger, “Sex and Character” in *Sexuality Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 57-58.

man who was attracted to the same sex described how his “distinct sexual feelings” towards his own sex were realized at an early age and how his “highly loving and clinging temperament” made him fundamentally different from his peers.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, T. A. Ross, in documenting the experience of one of his patient’s, writes, “The patient had regarded himself as a pure feminine [...] He had what seemed to him good reasons for his view. All his ideas of exalted love were associated with males; his dreams were of males, and of very masculine males indeed.”<sup>24</sup> While this is not in the patients’ exact words, it still shows an interaction with the ideas of sexologists.

Other examples in personal accounts also pointed to individuals describing their sexuality in terms of sexual inversion. In the writing of E. Krause, a woman with same-sex desire, she acknowledges a limited knowledge of “the noble science of medicine”<sup>25</sup> and her description of her childhood emphasizes a boyish nature.<sup>26</sup> The examples provide insights on how individuals understood their desires and identity, and they also point to the influence of sexologists’ works.

Despite the examples where “learned” and “lived” understandings corresponded, there were also significance instances where these interactions did not occur, which discredits Foucault’s argument that the modern sexuality emerges from institutional means like sexology. The memoirs of Gad Beck and Charlotte Wolff are examples of sexual identities that were shaped without a heavy influence of sexology theories. Although they both would have been

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<sup>23</sup> Havelock Ellis, “Studies in the Psychology of Sex, vol. II: Sexual Inversion,” in *Sexuality Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 53.

<sup>24</sup> T.A. Ross, “A Case of Sexual Inversion” in *Sexuality Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 68.

<sup>25</sup> E. Krause, “The Truth About Me,” in *Lesbian-Feminism in Turn-of-the-Century German* ed. and trans. Lillian Faderman and Brigitte Eriksson (United States: The Naiad Press Inc., 1980), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Krause, 24.

exposed to the environment in Germany that arguable made the modern homosexual identity possible, their writings show little very few interactions with official literature. For these reasons, their memoirs are significant in exposing how sexual identities could be shaped outside of the framework made by sexologists.

Gad Beck was a gay Jewish man who grew up in Berlin during the rise of Nazi regime. His memoir documents his experience of being discriminated against because of being Jewish, his resistance against the Nazis, and his conceptualization of his sexual identity. He describes his sexuality as both innate and acquired. He attributes the start of his same-sex attraction to his mother's midwife "heartily slapping life"<sup>27</sup> into him when he was born not breathing. Beck writes openly about his enjoyment as a child and adult in participating in typically "feminine" activities. This included wearing dresses, putting on "the theatrical airs and graces of a diva,"<sup>28</sup> and cuddling with dolls, including a boy doll.<sup>29</sup> His femininity became essential to how he understood his sexual desires and homosexuality in general. When referring to a relationship he had with another boy, he writes, "I had evidently aroused Manfred with my 'feminine' charm [...]. Whatever we did, it was not much like gay sex as one thinks of it today, but then again, Manfred was heterosexual anyway. [...] Even later, I often had relationships with men who were actually straight, for whom I was the only man they had anything with."<sup>30</sup> While Beck does not refer to it, this would have fit into the understanding by certain sexologist that feminine men should take on passive roles. Weininger, for example, argued that the law of sexual attraction – that is attraction between a feminine and masculine counterpart – had to be maintained when it

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<sup>27</sup> Gad Beck, *An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin* trans. Allison Brown (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Beck, 11

<sup>29</sup> Beck, 13

<sup>30</sup> Beck, 54-56.

came to inverted sexual attraction too.<sup>31</sup> It was acceptable as long as it fit into the established binaries, which Beck's relationships did as he represented the feminine part of the pair.

However, because Beck doesn't dialogue with this "learned" discussion, his memoir can be considered as existing outside of authority of sexologists' works.

Charlotte Wolff, born in West Prussia in 1897, grew up to become a prominent Jewish lesbian feminist. Her memoir reflects on how she came to study sexology as an adult and how she understood her same-sex desires as she grew up in the Weimar Republic. Unlike Beck who does not acknowledge the work of sexologist, Wolff does refer to them as well as reject their theories. She writes, "My feeling that love was something that only happened between women has been a certainty for me ever since I can remember. This conviction did not change, though I fully realized that it *my* kind love [attraction to women], and different from that of many others. [...] Labels like 'lesbian', 'hetero-', or 'homosexual' were out of place in my world."<sup>32</sup> She finds it unnecessary to create terms to define sexuality, which goes against both the theories of the sexologists and of Foucault. Wolff, instead, emphasizes the importance of the social climate of Germany, specifically Berlin. She talks about the fear in gay and lesbian bars over the threat of police raids, or 'Razzias,' and how Hirschfeld's sexual institute never had to worry about the same possibility.<sup>33</sup> Even in Wolff's discretization of the sexual institute, she acknowledges the authority that sexologists had in Germany. However, like Beck, her memoir shows how sexuality could be removed from the concepts of sexologists.

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<sup>31</sup> Weininger. 58.

<sup>32</sup> Charlotte Wolff, *Hindsight: An Autobiography* (London: Quarter Books Limited, 1980), 60.

<sup>33</sup> Wolff, 76

Because of the exchange between the “learned” and “lived” understandings of same-sex desire, the question over which one came first – the egg or the hen – becomes relevant. Foucault would argue that the work of sexologists ultimately initiated the discourse on homosexuality and set the precedent to how sexual identity could be classified. However, one could contend discussion on same-sex desire would not have existed unless there had been a need for the use of terms and classifications in the first place. For this reason, the formation of a modern sexual identity had to occur through both scientific and cultural influences. Michel Foucault was wrong to believe, as Beachy argues, that sexual identities emerged only from medical professionals.<sup>34</sup> Instead, modern sexual identity came about through the interplay between the two spheres. It was actively engaged within the history of the body and sexuality.

In conclusion, the Weimar Republic is particular to the formation of sexual discourse. It is important to consider the seemingly overnight change between the open visibility of sexual activity and expressions of identity in pre-Nazi German and the ridged, outwardly sexless society that followed. Where did the discourse of the modern sexuality go? This is a difficult question to answer, and one that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to consider the reasons why the creation of modern sexology could have taken place in Germany at the time of the Weimar Republic. A lot to do with it was undoubtedly the growth in the study of sexology and the legal situation in Germany. Both these things made homosexuality something to rally around or against. Additionally, the unique night scene and homosexual ‘underground’ would have allowed for spaces to experiment with one’s identity. This included gay and lesbian bars, cabarets, cinemas, magazines, and newspaper. Berlin was considered a kind of homosexual

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<sup>34</sup> Beachy, “The German Invention of Homosexuality,” 804.

capital.<sup>35</sup> The modern sexual identity may have originated in Germany and the Weimar Republic, but it was shaped by different factors that were specific to the time.

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<sup>35</sup> Tamagne, 50

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