



Hirschfeld, Magnus (1868-1935)

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Magnus Hirschfeld.
Archiv für
Sexualwissenschaft,
Berlin.

During his around-the-world journey begun in 1930, Magnus Hirschfeld was saluted in America as "[t]he Einstein of Sex" and in India as "the modern Vatsayana of the West." Today, however, his life and work seem almost erased from cultural memory, yet he deserves recognition as a significant theorist of sexuality and the most prominent advocate of homosexual emancipation of his time.

In seeking to assess the true dimensions of Hirschfeld's theoretical and emancipatory achievements, his motto *per scientiam ad justitiam* ["Through Science to Justice"] offers a key to his encompassing sexological program that moves from acknowledgement of the biological facts of human sexuality to a libertarian vision of culture capable of coping with endless sexual diversity. He was convinced that scientific understanding of sexuality would lead to tolerance and acceptance of sexual minorities.

Hirschfeld's most relevant theoretical contribution is his "doctrine of sexual intermediaries" (*Zwischenstufenlehre*). It contends that all human beings are intersexual variants, that is, unique composites of different proportions of masculinity and femininity. Since these proportions vary from one sexual layer of description to another in the same individual and can alter or be altered in time, it is, strictly speaking, not possible to postulate discrete sexual categories.

By assuming potentially infinite sexual constitutions and contributing to a deeper understanding of the perplexities inherent in man's intersexual condition, Hirschfeld anticipates some of the most fundamental tenets of queer and transgender studies.

Hirschfeld's Life

Magnus Hirschfeld was born to Jewish parents in the Prussian city of Kolberg, on the Baltic sea, on May 14, 1868. He studied modern languages in Breslau, and then medicine in Strasbourg, München, Heidelberg, and Berlin, where he took his degree in 1892.

While Charlotte Wolff in her biographical portrait underlines Hirschfeld's "bisexual twist," Manfred Herzer depicts Hirschfeld as "gay" in the very title of his biography. Although Hirschfeld regarded the issue of his own sexual orientation as a strictly private matter, there is no doubt about his liaisons with Karl Giese, the archives director of the Institute of Sexual Science, and, later in life, with his Chinese disciple Li Shiu Tong. In Hirschfeld's last will both are mentioned as his heirs.

As the most prominent leader of the early homosexual emancipation movement in Germany, Hirschfeld campaigned tirelessly on behalf of the "sexual rights" of minorities. He attempted to create organizational and editorial frameworks that would support the liberation of the sexually oppressed.

In 1897, Hirschfeld founded, along with Eduard Oberg, Max Spohr, and Franz Josef von Bülow, the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäre Komitee* [Scientific-Humanitarian Committee], whose first project was a

petition calling for the repeal of the anti-homosexual paragraph 175 of the Imperial Penal Code of 1871.

The Scientific-Humanitarian Committee never succeeded in its goal of repealing paragraph 175, but it did gather signatures of some 6,000 prominent Germans calling for repeal. And in 1929, a bill repealing paragraph 175 was reported from a committee of the German Parliament, though Parliament was adjourned without taking up the legislation.

In 1899, Hirschfeld began publishing the *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* [Yearbook of Intermediate Sexual Types], the world's first scientific journal dealing with sexual variants. It was published until 1923. The studies published by the Yearbook range from articles about homosexuality among "primitive" people to literary analyses and case studies.

After meeting Freud in Vienna in 1908, Hirschfeld became one of the founding members of the Berlin section of the Viennese Psychoanalytical Union, from which he resigned in 1911, following attacks by C. G. Jung during the third psychoanalytical congress in Weimar. In 1913 he founded along with Iwan Bloch and Heinrich Körber the "Medical Society for Sexual Science and Eugenics."

In July 1919, he opened the "Institute for Sexual Science" [*Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*], the actual forerunner of such institutions as the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research. The Institute became an important center for the study of all aspects of sexuality and amassed an impressive library.

Hirschfeld was a widely recognized speaker and a prolific writer. His publications dealt not only with all major areas of the nascent sexual science, but also with general health issues, sexual reform, politics, the history of morals, and racism.

In his bibliography, James D. Steakley mentions more than 500 items that appeared during Hirschfeld's life. His first sexological treatise was entitled *Sappho und Sokrates oder Wie erklärt sich die Liebe der Männer und Frauen zu Personen des eigenen Geschlechts?* [Sappho and Socrates, or How to Explain the Love of Men and Women for Persons of Their Own Sex?], published under the pseudonym "Th. Ramien" in 1896.

Among Hirschfeld's most important contributions to sexual science are *Die Transvestiten* [Transvestites] (1910); *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* [Homosexuality of Men and Women] (1914); and the three volumes of *Sexualpathologie* [Sexual Pathology] (1917). Between 1926 and 1930, Hirschfeld published *Geschlechtskunde* [Sexual Science], his five-volume *magnum opus*.

At an early stage of film history, Hirschfeld also participated in the production of *Anders als die Andern* [Different from the Others], the first homosexual liberation film. The somewhat melodramatic silent film premiered in May 1919. Its purpose was to expose the evil of paragraph 175 and the vulnerability of "sexual variants" to blackmail because of the paragraph. It was banned by the German government in August 1920.

In light of his Jewishness, his intense activism on behalf of progressive causes, and his vast body of work, it is not surprising that Hirschfeld became a target of right-wing nationalists. In 1920 he was attacked and severely wounded on the streets in Munich after a conference. In 1921, he was attacked again, suffering a fractured skull. From 1929 onward, the Nazis repeatedly assaulted Hirschfeld and disrupted his lectures.

What was initially planned as a lecture tour of the United States in 1930 was eventually extended to a world-wide trip during which Hirschfeld visited Japan, China, Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Egypt, and Palestine. Back in Europe in 1932, Hirschfeld decided not to return to Germany.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they destroyed the Institute for Sexual Science, including its library and files, the largest archive of its kind in the world. In 1934, the Nazi regime deprived Hirschfeld of German citizenship.

After moving to Ascona in Switzerland and then briefly to Paris, Hirschfeld finally settled in Nice in the south of France in 1934. He died there on his 67th birthday, May 14, 1935.

The Third Sex

In the nineteenth century, the term "third sex" was used by authors such as Théophile Gautier, Honoré de Balzac, and especially Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, but the relative popularity of the term in the twentieth century was due mainly to Hirschfeld. However, although he generally favored the term "third sex" over "homosexuality," with its usual connotation of sexual acts, he never used the concept in his scientific publications.

Hirschfeld's fame as a proponent of the "third sex" has had an unfortunate consequence in terms of his later reputation as a sexologist. He is best known for the belief that homosexuals constitute a third sex, intermediate between the heterosexual male and the heterosexual female. However, he propounded this position not as a scientific proposition, but as a political tactic.

Since for Hirschfeld a third sexual alternative implied, in the last resort, the addition of a further "fiction" to already fictitious categories, its postulation never led him to revoke his fundamental insight that "all human beings are intersexual variants." The "third sex" category was not regarded by Hirschfeld as "something complete and closed in itself," but as an indispensable "makeshift" [*Notbehelf*] designed to overcome an "extremely superficial scheme of classification into man or woman."

From Hirschfeld's perspective, members of the so-called third sex, like those who deem themselves in conformity with a pretended sexual majority, simply constitute different varieties within the inexhaustible varieties of "sexual intermediaries" [*sexuelle Zwischenstufen*] or "sexual transitions" [*Geschlechtsübergänge*].

Hirschfeld's Theoretical Achievement

Hirschfeld's main theoretical achievement consists in his biologically grounded deconstruction of the Western ideology of sexual dimorphism that originated in Abrahamic creation narratives, the rigid division of humanity into male and female.

In its final consequence, Hirschfeld's "doctrine of sexual intermediaries" challenges the premise of complete sexual disjunction, according to which the exemplary Adam is to be understood as man, because he does not possess the sexual attributes of his human Other: Adam is not Eve, a man is not a woman.

The paradigm shift that Hirschfeld introduced contends that a human being is neither man nor woman, but at the same time man and woman in unique and therefore unrepeatable proportions.

The "doctrine of sexual intermediaries" is a new way of conceptualizing sexual difference. It is the foundation of Hirschfeld's theoretical and libertarian program, even though he never developed in detail its actual scope and relevance, and only hinted at its radical implications.

Sexual Difference and the "Residual" Sex

In *Sappho und Sokrates*, Hirschfeld places "the purely biological, non-pathological conception of same-sex love" within a definite scheme. This scheme, while not new, is theoretically more ambitious than those of his predecessors. Going far beyond merely normalizing the "third sex" by virtue of its conformity with nature, Hirschfeld articulates in this early treatise the essential traits of his "doctrine of sexual intermediaries."

Thus, Hirschfeld refers to the reality of a bisexual primary disposition, whose traces or "remainders" can be

readily perceived at the physiological level: "Every man keeps his stunted womb, the uterus masculinus and the superfluous nipples until death; likewise, every woman [keeps] her useless epididymis and her spermatic cord." Arguing analogically, Hirschfeld points out that, with regard to the psychic center of sexual sensibility, "one can definitely assume that, here also, residues of the drive subsist that on the whole are eventually destined to disappear."

Since "in their primary disposition all human beings are with respect to their bodies and souls bisexual," the inexhaustible diversity of sexualities results not from qualitative, but from quantitative differences that are determined by the way the primary sexual disposition reacts to processes that hinder or advance its development.

Hirschfeld underlines that the later a particular sexual difference is developed, the more significant the influence the "residual" sex has on it. Whereas gradual deviations occur less frequently with regard to the primary sexual characteristics (such as the genitals), and more frequently with regard to the secondary ones (such as other physical characteristics), in the case of tertiary characteristics (such as sexual drive and psychological responses) deviations occur even more frequently, as is shown by the high incidence of sexual orientations at variance with the supposed norm.

The Continuum of Nature

Hirschfeld chose as motto for his treatise *Geschlechtsübergänge* [Sexual Transitions] (1905) a quotation from the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: "Tout va par degrés dans la nature et rien par sauts" [In nature everything happens by degrees, nothing by leaps]. Applying this principle to sexuality, Hirschfeld concluded that all artificially separated sexual varieties prove to be transitions within the pervasive continuity of nature.

Contrary to the dichotomic, or either-or, scheme of sexual difference, the idea of sexual gradation allows in principle for infinite variations of sexual constitutions depending on the way the poles of the masculine and the feminine combine at each of the different levels of sexual description, which according to Hirschfeld include: (1) sexual organs, (2) other bodily sexual characteristics, (3) sexual drive, and (4) other psychological characteristics.

Since in this scheme sexual difference is not determined in relation to one single excluded alternative (male or female), but in relation to an open-ended system of as yet only partially realized combinations of the masculine and the feminine at the different descriptive layers, the sexuality of each and every individual is characterized by a unique complexity.

Sexual Identity and Narrativity

Having dispensed with the issue of fixed sexual identities, the doctrine of sexual intermediaries transforms the question of sexual (*self-identification*) into a continuous task that precludes final closure and in which categorizations can be, at most, provisional approximations that must be constantly adjusted.

Thus, the determination and expression of an individual's sexuality becomes a narrative of changing sexual differences as determined against the background of latencies and possibilities that underlie the sexual continuum of nature.

Even though Hirschfeld avoided thorough formulations concerning these theoretical consequences, his interest in the sexological aspect of biographies, along with his tireless efforts to refine his theory, make it apparent that he was guided by a concept of sexuality in which difference is not determined once and for all within a binary pattern, but is defined within the framework of potentially infinite sexual varieties, all differing from one another and undergoing change throughout the life of the individual.

Present Relevancy

Hirschfeld scholarship has systematically underrated and misrepresented his work. Hence, it is not surprising that he has been ignored in almost all substantial debates in gender, gay, lesbian, or queer studies. Indeed, most scholars working in these areas are barely aware that *Geschlechtskunde* [Sexual Science], the compendium of Hirschfeld's life work, foreshadows the most relevant insights that determine the scope of their own disciplines.

Indeed, Hirschfeld's "doctrine of sexual intermediaries" re-inscribes and re-interprets sexual difference more thoroughly than even the Freudian psychoanalytical literature and its post-modern derivatives. It anticipates the contention of contemporary gender and queer studies that the distribution of individuals into male and female is obsolete and naive.

Sexual Politics and the Nazi Reaction

To some extent, the misinterpretations of Hirschfeld's work are due to the fact that in his emancipatory program, he sought to win sympathy and understanding for sexual minorities from those who considered themselves perfectly "normal" according to the dimorphic scheme. Thus, he feared demonstrating to this ostensible majority that their basic assumption about their own "normality" was groundless.

Hirschfeld's reserve is hardly surprising if one considers that as a Jew and leader of a sexual minority, he constantly had to cope with hostility and prejudice. In retrospect, Hirschfeld's biography corroborates that his caution and reticence were justified.

In 1933, after he had been driven out of Germany, he was sitting in a Paris cinema when images of the plunder and destruction of his own Institute of Sexual Science in Berlin appeared in a news short. With this act of vandalism, the Nazis put an end to the German *Sexualwissenschaft*, a scientific project founded and developed mainly by Jews or by Christians of Jewish descent.

Hirschfeld died soon after the demise of his beloved Institute, but his work and his ideas have survived him. His program of achieving justice through science failed to yield the successes for which he so passionately yearned. Still, this prolific scholar and courageous campaigner deserves the respect of all who value science and justice.

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