



Karsch-Haack, Ferdinand (1853-1936)

by J. Edgar Bauer

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Ferdinand Karsch-Haack's most significant contribution to the sexual emancipation movement in Germany consisted of demonstrating the occurrence of same-sex sexual activity throughout the animal kingdom, among the so-called primitive peoples, and in all non-Western cultures.

His zoological and ethno-historical arguments were intended to enable a deeper understanding of human sexual diversity and to promote the acceptability of same-sex love in Western societies.

Although the sexual emancipation movement became increasingly divided between a group centered around Magnus Hirschfeld and the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee and another with more elitist aspirations known as "Die Eigenen," both groups recognized the intrinsic merits of Karsch-Haack's work and were eager to publish his essays in their journals.

Not surprisingly, he is depicted, along with Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Havelock Ellis, as one of the "great authorities" in the area of sexual science in the book *Homosexuelle Probleme* [Homosexual Problems] (1902) by Ludwig E. West (pseudonym of Johannes Gaulke, friend and collaborator of Magnus Hirschfeld).

Life and Works

Ferdinand Karsch-Haack was born on September 2, 1853 in Münster, a city in northwestern Germany, the son of a physician. He pursued advanced education in Berlin, where he presented his dissertation on the gallwasp in 1877. Eventually, he was named "Privatdozent" for Zoology and became Curator at the Zoological Museum of the Friedrich-Wilhelm University in Berlin.

Despite being an entomologist by profession, Karsch-Haack was best known for his ethnological and cultural treatises on same-sex love and for his critical studies of homosexual personalities in European history. Unlike most non-medical authors on homosexuality such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs ("Numa Numantius") or John Henry Mackay ("Sagitta") who published under pseudonyms, Karsch-Haack either kept his own name (Ferdinand Karsch) or, from 1905 on, almost always added to it his mother's maiden name (Haack) on all his publications.

Two important texts by Karsch-Haack are not part of his zoological or ethno-historical works, but are frankly emancipatory: *Beruhet gleichgeschlechtliche Liebe auf Sozialität? Eine begründete Zurückweisung* [Is same-sex love based on sociability? A grounded Rejection] (1905) and *Die deutsche Bewegung zur Aufhebung des § 175 und zur Beurteilung der Ächtung gleichgeschlechtlichen Verhaltens* [The German Movement for the Abrogation of Paragraph 175 and for the Assessment of the Ban on Same-Sex Conduct] (1906).

Seeking to create a forum for his scientific and emancipatory ideas, Karsch-Haack--along with René Stelter--also published *Uranos. Blätter für ungeschmäleretes Menschentum* [Leaves for Unimpaired

Humanity], a short-lived magazine, from 1921 to 1923.

In 1933, the year Hitler seized power, Karsch-Haack published his last important essay, "Die Liebschaften des Prinzen Heinrich, Bruder Friedrichs des Grossen" [The love affairs of Prince Heinrich, Brother of Frederick the Great].

He died three years later, on December 20, 1936.

The Sexual Diversity of Animals

The most significant writings by Karsch-Haack may be read as a twofold reply to the typically fin-de-siècle objection that same-sex love is the regrettable product of "overcultivation" or excessive civilization [*Überkultur*].

Karsch-Haack contended in a first set of arguments that homosexuality is not a product of civilized refinement, but a phenomenon frequently observable at different levels of animal evolution. Consequently, his seminal text "Päderastie und Tribadie bei den Tieren auf Grund der Literatur" [Pederasty and Tribadomy among Animals based on Literature], published in Magnus Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* [Yearbook for Sexual Intermediaries] in 1900, is intended to dispute the unwarranted assumption that homosexuality is absent from the animal kingdom.

In time, Karsch-Haack amplified the scope of his argument to include the sexual complexities of the plant world. Not surprisingly, he underscored in his later work the idea that human homosexuality is grounded in a "natural disposition" [*Naturanlage*], which humans share with other complex life forms.

Karsch-Haack's assessment of same-sex love within the broader context of the history of life inaugurated a biological approach to homosexuality that focuses on the analogy between the polymorphism of human sexuality and the sexual diversity present throughout nature. Arguably, the most rewarding result to which this approach has led is Bruce Bagmihl's compendious treatise, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (1999).

Sexual Diversity among Primitive People

In 1901, Karsch-Haack published another seminal essay under the title *Uranismus oder Päderastie und Tribadie bei den Naturvölkern* [Uranism, or Pederasty and Tribadomy among Primitive Peoples]. In this work, he introduces a second set of arguments against the idea that excessive civilization fosters homosexuality.

Karsch-Haack planned an encompassing project, *Forschungen über gleichgeschlechtliche Liebe* [Investigations of Same-Sex Love], whose main contention would be that same-sex love is neither a "vice" nor a "crime," but a "natural phenomenon" [*natürliche Erscheinung*] occurring "everywhere and at all times" [*überall und allezeit*].

The five-volume project would have dealt with (1) primitive peoples, (2) East Asians, (3) Semites and Hamites, and (4 and 5) the Aryans. Because of the death of Karsch-Haack's publisher, however, only two volumes appeared: *Die Ostasiaten: Chinesen, Japaner und Koreer* [The East Asians: Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans] (1906), and *Das Geschlechtliche Leben der Naturvölker* [The Sexual Life of Primitive Peoples] (1911).

In 1923, Karsch-Haack published in Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch* "Die Rolle der Homoerotik im Arabertum" [The Role of Homoeroticism in the Arabic World], a study based on material that was originally assigned to the third volume of *Forschungen*.

Although Karsch-Haack's overall project is centered on the distinction between primitive and civilized

peoples [*Naturvolk / Kulturvolk*], this distinction is to a large extent relativized from the standpoint of the "unity of mankind" (*Einheit des Menschengeschlechts*). Against this universal backdrop, same-sex love appears as an undeniable reality whose roots are in the "physical and psychical natural disposition of animals and human beings" [*physisch-psychischen tierischen und menschlichen Naturanlage*].

Karsch-Haack's argument foreshadows recent ethnological analyses that have verified his contention that homosexual behavior is widespread in all kinds of societies.

Against the Medicalization of Same-Sex Love

As a zoologist, Karsch-Haack relentlessly targeted the medical view of same-sex love as an illness in need of cure. The medical approach Karsch-Haack rejected was already apparent in the terminology the new sexologists employed. Terms such as "contrary sexual instinct" [*konträre Sexualempfindung*], "sexual aberration" [*geschlechtliche Verirrung / geschlechtliche Irrweg*], "sexual inversion" [*sexuelle Inversion*], or "sexual perversion" [*sexuelle Perversion*] obviously implied a pathological aspect of the phenomenon they attempted to describe.

Karsch-Haack also rejected the technical coinage "homosexuality" as a hybrid term that combines a Greek and a Latin root, as well as the term "third sex," which was popularized by Magnus Hirschfeld in his non-scientific publications. Instead of these terms, Karsch-Haack mostly used the German terms "homoerotische" or "gleichgeschlechtliche Liebe" that can be translated as "same-sex love."

Like his contemporary John Henry Mackay, the Scottish-born German poet and intellectual leader of the pederastic faction within the sexual emancipation movement, Karsch-Haack saw in the medicalization of same-sex love an attempt to continue with modern instrumentalities a tradition of homophobia long ago initiated by priests and legislators.

In response, Karsch-Haack concentrated on the "matter-of-fact materials" [*Tatsachenmaterial*] that would eventually confirm his basic premise concerning the universality and naturalness of same-sex love. Throughout Karsch-Haack's ethno-historical work, his allegiance to the "sociological school" was enriched and qualified by the biologist's approach to the facts of natural life.

De-Hierarchization of Kinds of Love

One of the main theoretical aims Karsch-Haack pursued was the dismantlement of the hierarchization of love forms, implicit in the traditional opposition between heterosexual and homosexual instincts and patterns of conduct.

Given the universal occurrence of same-sex love, Karsch-Haack insisted on the "recognition of its naturalness" and dismissed the "theoretical discussions and considerations" regarding its etiology. Not without irony, he advanced the argument that no attempts to explain same-sex love should be undertaken as long as the love between men and women is taken "as self-evident" [*als bloße Selbstverständlichkeit*].

Further, Karsch-Haack contended that what is in need of explanation is not love *per se*, but the "irritability" [*Reizbarkeit*] of heterosexuals when confronted with the manifestations of same-sex love. Since this reaction can be observed especially in Christian culture, but not in all cultures and is even absent among primitive people, Karsch-Haack stressed the fact that heterosexual intolerance with regard to "homoeroticism" is culturally determined and not the result of an inborn disposition.

Homosexualities and Discrimination

Karsch-Haack's attempt to show the instability of the opposition between "true homosexuality" (as an irresistible, inborn instinct) and so-called "pseudo-homosexuality" (originating in merely external causes,

such as seduction) is a telling instance of his deconstructive strategy. Having accepted in principle the difference between both types of homosexuality, Karsch-Haack went on to underscore that, due to their "correspondence with regard to the external form," it is not possible to distinguish them in their practical consequences. Since there is no way to exclude the possibility that specific homosexual acts are the consequence of an ineradicable disposition, such acts should never be treated as a "vice" liable to punishment.

For Karsch-Haack, same-sex love is "a complete analogue" of "heteroerotic" love except with regard to procreation. This difference, however, cannot warrant anti-homosexual discrimination, since propagation is not the invariable result of the heterosexual instinct. The distinction between sexuality and procreation constitutes an essential premise of Karsch-Haack's libertarian endeavors.

Unresolved Tensions

His emancipatory intentions notwithstanding, Karsch-Haack developed his ethnological and historical arguments within the essentialist schemes of binomic sexuality as developed in the Western tradition. Symptomatically, he assumes the existence of essentially different tasks and roles for men and women that are determined by their specific "sexual nature" [*Geschlechtsnatur*]. His most relevant treatises presuppose the binomial categories of male and female, as well as the resulting combination of men and women in heterosexual and homosexual relations.

In spite of such assumptions, however, Karsch-Haack contends throughout his work that nature has more needs and impulses than "human philosophy" could ever dream of. He was convinced that in the realm of the sexual, nature never leaves room for the simply "unnatural." Thus, the copiousness of "sexual intermediaries" [*sexuelle Zwischenstufen*] between the "normal" man and the "normal" woman should be understood as corresponding to the general design in nature, even as the very existence of such "intermediaries" questions and destabilizes the classificatory schemes commonly used in Western discourse.

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