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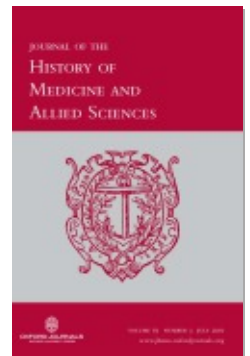
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Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences, Volume 57, Number 1, January 2002, pp. 79-85 (Review)

Published by Oxford University Press

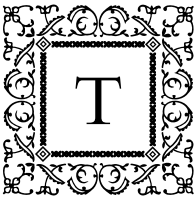


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Science and Sexual Identity: An Essay Review*

VERNON A. ROSARIO

HE 1990s, proclaimed President George Bush, was the “decade of the brain.” Our fin-de-siècle might well be dubbed the “era of the genome” given the regular announcements of genetic linkages for diseases, temperamental and behavioral traits, and sexualities. It is easy to imagine that the phenomenal rhetorical power of biomedical science in the popular imagination is a result of concrete advancements in medical therapeutics and scientific knowledge. However significant the accumulation of scientific information in the late twentieth century, it is nevertheless sobering to recall that there is, as yet, no consensus on the pathophysiology of any major psychiatric illnesses nor any approved gene therapies. The allure of biological explanations of the human condition, therefore, must lie elsewhere, beyond the technological feat of the Human Genome Project. The previous fin-de-siècle had its own trust in science and the power of biological explanations of the self and society. Two recent books, Harry Oosterhuis’s *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing and the Making of Sexual Identity* and Chandak Sengoopta’s *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna*, help us examine the allure of biological explanations of sexual subjectivity and social difference. How can we understand the appeal of biological explanations—be it of gay genes, gay brain structures, or sexual dimorphism in the brain—particularly when this seems to imply the “pathologization” of human differences? In the areas of gender and sexuality, an

*HARRY OOSTERHUIS. *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000. x, 321 pp., illus. \$30. CHANDAK SENGOOPTA. *Otto Weininger: Sex, Science, and Self in Imperial Vienna*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000. x, 239 pp. \$29.

abundance of historical studies have criticized the medicalization of marginalized groups such as women, gays and lesbians, people of color.

Michel Foucault most notably advanced the thesis that the nineteenth-century medicalization of bodies was central to a new regime of power and of social management.¹ It was the neuropsychiatric “etymologization” of perversity that not just managed deviant sexualities, but generated the new sexual subjectivities themselves. No Victorian doctor is more responsible for this etymologization than Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902). Krafft-Ebing was born in Mannheim, Germany into an aristocratic family. His father was a high-level administrator, and his maternal grandfather was a distinguished criminal lawyer. Krafft-Ebing did his medical training in Heidelberg, and his first clinical appointment was in the Illenau asylum. He went on to become medical superintendent of the Feldhof Asylum near Graz and professor of psychiatry at the University of Graz in 1873. While there he established himself as a leader in forensic psychiatry, arguing that the expertise of psychiatrists should afford them a privileged role in the legal determination of mental competence. After publishing a groundbreaking textbook of forensic psychiatry in 1875, Krafft-Ebing moved in 1889 to the University of Vienna. Dedicated to clinical education and the use of patients to learn and teach psychiatric principles, he was equally committed to developing the professional standing of psychiatry, partly through strengthening its ties with neurology.

Krafft-Ebing was an inveterate nosographer, classifying psychiatric disorders into different subtypes largely based on phenomenological criteria. This is apparent in his earliest article on “anomalies of the sex drive” and in the first edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, which distinguished four categories of sexual pathology: decreased, increased, precocious or senile, and perverted sexual drive.² This last one included contrary sexual feeling (*conträre Sexualempfindung*), which was the term for “psychosexual inversion” or what became generally known as homosexuality. All of these conditions were presented as

1. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*; vol. 1: *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

2. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, “Über gewisse Anomalien des Geschlechtstrieb,” *Arch. Psych. Nervenkrank.* 1877, 7, 291–312; *Psychopathia Sexualis: Eine klinisch-forensische Studie* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1886).

manifestations of degenerate hereditary and moral insanity. Krafft-Ebing also published monographs and textbooks on hypnotherapy, neurasthenia, menstrual psychosis, and general psychiatry. However, he remains best known for *Psychopathia Sexualis*, his encyclopedia of sexual perversities. This volume is regularly vaunted as the founding stone of modern sexology and the medical source for multiple diagnostic terms: sadism, masochism, and an array of fetishisms.

Krafft-Ebing's core pathophysiological concept was hereditary degeneration: that any form of unhealthful behavioral or environmental impact could damage the organism and its offspring, leading to the gradual accumulation of degenerate stigmata from generation to generation. Given that he viewed sexual inversion or homosexuality as a degenerate neuropsychiatric condition, it has been easy to portray Krafft-Ebing as an enemy of homosexuals. However, the picture has always been more complicated. Krafft-Ebing supported the abolition of antisodomy laws, served as a defense witness in sodomy cases, and was a staunch supporter of sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, the most outspoken homosexual rights activist in pre-Nazi Germany.

Psychopathia Sexualis swelled from one edition to the next, not just with new forensic cases, but also because lay readers wrote Krafft-Ebing with the intent of being included in his study. Did these informants foolishly conspire in their own pathologization? Many historians have pointed out that biological models have been popular with inverts and homosexuals (especially men) since the beginning of biomedical attempts to explain same-sex attraction.³ Biomedicine has tremendous cultural weight and can lend a sense of ontological authenticity by explaining the existential feeling of the deep-rootedness of sexuality as a matter of genes and somatic physiology. Biological explanations also can be politically expedient in combating legal and religious arguments of immoral or criminal choice.

Oosterhuis examines the issue of subjects' participating in their medicalization through a detailed reading of Krafft-Ebing's correspondence that had sat unexplored in the family attic since his death. These are the letters that Krafft-Ebing incorporated into each new edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and which, Oosterhuis argues, moved

3. See David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and the essays in Vernon Rosario, ed., *Science and Homosexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

Krafft-Ebing to moderate his position on the pathology of homosexuality and to become one of the fin-de-siècle champions of homosexual rights. In rehabilitating Krafft-Ebing, Oosterhuis also sets out to show the centrality of Krafft-Ebing's work to the emergence of modern sexual identity. Oosterhuis places Krafft-Ebing and his work in the broader professional, political, and cultural context of fin-de-siècle Europe, and he writes with great lucidity and scholarly knowledge. *Stepchildren of Nature* is thus one of the finest synthetic reviews of Victorian psychiatry, sexology, and homosexuality; it is an admirable model of how to do the social history of medicine.

The popular diffusion of psychiatric writings (at least among the learned, upper classes) was already such that Krafft-Ebing's correspondents adopted the medical case history form for their unsolicited autobiographies. They reported their extended family's medical and psychiatric histories, masturbatory experiences, neuropathic symptoms, and psychic distress, lending them a distinctly pathologic flavor. However, not all of them wallowed in "depression and despair" over their self-diagnosed "moral insanity" (p. 154). Some subjects astutely and poignantly argued that their psychiatric problems were a result of social oppression: "We are considered diseased because eventually the majority of us actually become ill. . . . Consider what strength of will and nerves is required for one to constantly dissimulate, lie, and feign all of his life! . . . How injurious it is to our nerves to constantly be compelled to hide all such thoughts and feelings [of same-sex love] in our hearts" (p. 168). Some, however, declared themselves healthy, happy, and perfectly content to embrace their homosexual drive: "I knew positively that my whole temperament would find happiness and satisfaction in this," wrote a young homosexual lawyer, "and I resolved to find a human being whom I can love and from whom I would never separate again. I don't have any qualms about my way of acting" (p. 162). Krafft-Ebing also reprinted letters that outright condemned his position even while recognizing its political value: "Your opinion that the phenomenon under consideration is primarily due to an inborn 'pathological' disposition will, perhaps, make it soon possible to overcome existing prejudices and awaken pity for us poor, 'abnormal' men, instead of the present repugnance and contempt. Much as I believe that the viewpoint expressed by you is possibly beneficial to us, I am still not willing, in the interest of science, to accept unconditionally the word 'patho-

logical” (p. 166). Some subjects even proclaimed the superiority of their homosexual love over that of heterosexuals. While most neuropsychiatrists of the time took such declarations as further evidence of the manifest moral insanity of inverts, Krafft-Ebing reported them—not just neutrally, but approvingly. He relied on these declarations in court testimony and forensic texts that argued that homosexuality was not a crime, that the average homosexual had the same moral standards as heterosexuals, and that some gifted homosexuals were “superior degenerates.” In his last article on the subject, published in Hirschfeld’s *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* the year before his death, Krafft-Ebing came the closest to rejecting the whole degeneracy model, and concluded that homosexuality was a biological and psychological condition that was more of a misfortune than a disease.⁴

Oosterhuis thus offers compelling reasons why homosexuals participated in Krafft-Ebing’s project. Correspondents found relief from their solitude and singularity when they recognized their condition in *Psychopathia Sexualis*. It gave inverts an unprecedented and legitimate platform for publicizing and campaigning for homosexual rights. Many correspondents genuinely viewed Krafft-Ebing as a sympathetic, powerful ally. Equally importantly, Oosterhuis argues, what occurred in the complex conversation between inverts and Krafft-Ebing through letters and new editions of *Psychopathia Sexualis* was the development of twentieth-century sexual identity. We find here the consolidation of a particular bourgeois “coming out” narrative of congenital, unalterable sexual orientation and of the centrality of sexuality to subjectivity. We also discover in the pages of *Psychopathia Sexualis* the thematics of all the major gay rights cultural and political issues that continue to be disputed today in the United States.

Oosterhuis accomplishes much in his monograph, but it seems important to point out that women and a feminist analytics scarcely enter into the discussion, in part because of the dearth of female correspondents and patients. Krafft-Ebing suggested that this was because of his own gender, the legal freedom of lesbians, and that homosexuality was less problematic for women. Oosterhuis’s tabulation of Krafft-Ebing’s correspondents reveals that a significant number of women described contrary sexual feeling, erotic paranoia, and

4. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, “Neue Studien auf dem Gebiete der Homosexualität,” *Jahr. sex. Zwischenstufen*, 1901, 3, 1–36.

“psychosis menstrualis” (the last group was the subject of Krafft-Ebing’s final monograph). However, the relative invisibility or medical disinterest in lesbianism deserves further examination. Finally, in his zeal to rehabilitate Krafft-Ebing, Oosterhuis sometimes stretches a bit too far to suggest Krafft-Ebing’s modernity or political correctness. Like Freud, Krafft-Ebing may have been exceptionally progressive in his views, but he was still a man of his time. Oosterhuis tries to interpret Krafft-Ebing’s work as cryptofeminist, proto-Freudian, and promoting the moral equality of homosexuality and heterosexuality. We need not go that far while still appreciating Oosterhuis’s richly textured reevaluation of Krafft-Ebing.

Krafft-Ebing is certainly deserving of political rehabilitation, but the same can hardly be said for his contemporary Otto Weininger (1880–1903), a young, Jewish, probably homosexual, Viennese philosopher. Weininger generated a cultural sensation with his *Geschlecht und Charakter: Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung* (Sex and Character, 1903), in part because of his suicide shortly after its publication. Its scientific Aryanism—virulently racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic—made it a favorite of the Nazis. Relying on neo-Kantian philosophy and a smorgasbord of scientific ideas, Weininger argued that Jews, like women, lacked a moral or rational sense, were driven by sexual passion alone, and therefore were inferior beings. The great internal contradiction of his work was that, although he represented male and female character as radically different, he also relied on the theory of “universal bisexuality”: that all humans had male and female elements from embryological development, down to the cellular level, as well as psychologically. This became the foundation for his depathologization of homosexuality, which was the natural, physiological, and inevitable outcome of the mixture of sexes. It was his elaboration of the theory of bisexuality that most famously instigated the bitter rupture between Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Fliess, a German otorhinolaryngologist. The Freud–Fliess correspondence between 1887 and 1907 documents their intimate friendship and the emergence of foundational concepts in psychoanalysis.⁵ Fliess had evolved his own theory of bisexuality and sexed biorhythms and was convinced Freud had revealed these to Weininger. Sengoopta acknowledges from the outset Weininger’s

5. Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*, ed. Jeffrey Masson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

political unsavoriness, and instead aims to reexamine the intellectual, political, and scientific roots of *Sex and Character* to demonstrate that Weininger was not so far out of line from other thinkers of his time. Sengoopta's monograph represents a monumental work of intellectual history that traces the multifarious sources of Weininger's hyper-graphic thesis.

Sengoopta demonstrates that Weininger's bisexuality thesis was grounded in a wide array of scientific theories and publications—some well accepted, others more questionable. The notion that homosexuality was a form of psychosexual hermaphroditism was already well established. Weininger's originality lay in arguing that, contrary to Krafft-Ebing's model, sexual inversion was not a manifestation of degenerate hermaphroditism, but a natural and inevitable result of bisexual gradations. Thus he went even further than Hirschfeld in depathologizing homosexuality. Weininger's theory of homosexuality is unusual in a work that otherwise attempts to denigrate the biology and psyche of most other marginalized groups. Even if it represents his only progressive thesis, it still alerts us to the problematic uses of scientific information. Whether or not he was homosexual, Weininger's defense of homosexuality is consonant with the writings of Krafft-Ebing's homosexual correspondents who relied on biological models to stake sociopolitical claims. *Sex and Character* as a whole, however, remains a cautionary tale: scientific ideas can be used just as easily to justify the most hateful prejudice as to bolster social equality. The "objectivity" of biology is even more seductive today than a century ago given the inaccessibility and esoteric quality of molecular biology. Oosterhuis's and Sengoopta's work, however, alerts us to the necessity of critically examining biomedicine as a product of its social and political crucible.