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The Historicity of Sexuality: Knowledge of the Past in the Emergence of Modern Sexual Science

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From the very moment the concept of sexuality emerged in nineteenth-century European medical and psychiatric thought, it became a topic of historicization. This historicization formed a consistent habit of thought in many of the medical and psychiatric texts that first enunciated sexuality as a distinct field of meaning. Dialogue between doctors and the first historians of sexuality informed the emergence of both sexology and of the historiography of sexuality. This dialogue suggests a need to rethink the origins of sexual historiography, situating current historians within a continuous genealogy, rather than as transcendental observers marked by epistemological rupture from earlier biological theories of sexual evolution.

This paper considers European medical and sexological texts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which demonstrate that a strong sense of historicity accompanied the emergence of the concept of sexuality in European cultures at this time. It proposes a reconsideration of sexological histories of sexuality as constituting an important part of the intellectual genealogy of the historiography of sexuality. Sexuality was heavily imbued with historicity from its earliest articulations as an object of inquiry, and it was in works of nineteenth-century medical description that some of the first extensive attempts to historicize sexuality occurred. This paper is in four sections. It begins by pondering why recent historical-theoretical accounts of the origins of sexuality historiography have tended to deny or overlook its nineteenth-century antecedents. The second section considers the social-evolutionary models that characterized many sexological accounts of the historical past, and their relation to biological theories of evolution. The third section examines some of the earliest uses of historical vignettes about sexuality in French and German/Austrian nineteenth-century psychiatric texts. The fourth section considers late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German, French, Swedish and English texts dealing with morality in ancient, medieval and early modern European history, and the creation in this genre of the first scholarly works frankly calling themselves “histories” of sexual matters.

Rethinking the Intellectual Genealogy of Sexuality Historiography

Recent works of historical theory have typically dated sexuality historiography from the late twentieth century, asserting its novelty with reference as touchstones either

to the linguistic turn and French post-structuralism, to social constructionism, to feminism, or to the sexual revolution. The nineteenth century is commonly thought to have had no forms of historiography of sexuality of its own. In 1972 when Vern Bullough's work was gaining prominence, he himself mused that it was a "virgin field" (perhaps intentionally punning).¹ But most often Michel Foucault is falsely considered to have written the first history of sexuality, thus initiating what Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot have called "the formation of a new field of inquiry."² It may be that many current scholars making such assumptions are thinking of historical writing about sexuality purely in relation to current disciplinary academic norms. But some recent remarks suggest that their assumptions are even broader, namely that the very impulse to historicize sexuality per se is a recent one. In the mammoth 2013 *Sage Handbook of Historical Theory* there are numerous claims about the late twentieth-century novelty of the historicization of sexuality: Brian Lewis refers to the crisis of social history in the 1980s as producing a new interest in things "not previously seen as *having* a history, such as the body, sexuality and emotions," while Amy Richlin asserts that "the urge to write a history of sexuality is relatively recent."³ Now, Richlin may be a classicist, but I am fairly sure she was not here thinking of the period between 1830 and 1910 when she used the word "recent." This is clear in her further statement that "the history of sexuality is a product of the sexual revolutionaries of the late twentieth century."⁴ Without wishing to deny the tremendously important contributions of Foucault and other outstanding historians of sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s, of the sexual revolution, or of feminism, it is patently not the case that the urge to historicize sexuality was invented *de novo* in this time; rather, important attempts to open the field of investigation were made by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century doctors, psychiatrists, sexologists, philosophers, philologists and classicists, and these warrant inclusion in the genealogy of this historiographic field.

Several scholars have indeed acknowledged some of the early historicizations of sexuality. Steven Garton includes a brief passage in his *Histories of Sexuality: Antiquity to the Sexual Revolution*, while Daniel Orrells, Alistair Blanshard, Jana Funke and others include single chapters on the importance of nineteenth-century classicism in the early history of European sexual science.⁵ This article builds on

¹Vern Bullough, "Sex in History: A Virgin Field," *Journal of Sex Research* 8 (1972), 101–16.

²Nancy Partner, "Foundations: Theoretical Frameworks for the Knowledge of the Past," in Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Historical Theory* (London, 2013), 1–8, at 7.

³Brian Lewis, "The Newest Social History: Crisis and Renewal," in Partner and Foot, *The Sage Handbook of Historical Theory*, 225–37, at 227, original emphasis. Amy Richlin, "Sexuality and History," in *ibid.*, 294–310, at 294; also Ann Curthoys and John Docker, "The Boundaries of History and Fiction," in *ibid.*, 202–18, at 211.

⁴Richlin, "Sexuality and History," 294.

⁵Steven Garton, *Histories of Sexuality: Antiquity to the Sexual Revolution* (London, 2004), 1–4; Daniel Orrells, *Sex: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (London, 2015); Alistair J. L. Blanshard, "Queer Desires and Classicizing Strategies of Resistance," in Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands, eds., *Sex, Knowledge and Receptions of the Past* (Oxford, 2015), 25–44; Jana Funke, "Navigating the Past: Sexuality, Race and the Uses of the Primitive in Magnus Hirschfeld's *The World Journey of a Sexologist*," in *ibid.*, 111–34. See also Alison M. Moore, "Androgyny, Perversion and Social Evolution in Interwar Psychoanalytic Thought," in *ibid.* 220–42; Harry Cocks and Matt Houlbrook, "Introduction," in Matt Houlbrook and Harry Cocks, eds., *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality* (Basingstoke, 2006), 1–18, at 3–5.

their observations, as well as on Patricia Cotti's consideration of the importance of cultural history for the development of Freud's psychoanalytic thought.⁶ However, these accounts either provide only brief mention of nineteenth-century precursors within historiographic surveys focused largely on the late twentieth century, or else are specialized studies about nineteenth-century thought that do not relate these contexts to the emergence of the modern historiographic field. In works of historical theory and of historiographic overview, the tendency to insist on a distinct epistemological rupture marking late twentieth-century historiography of sexuality has been the far more dominant trend, and most historians who work in the field refer to no works of sexuality historiography prior to Foucault.⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, in a recent survey of the history of sexual historiography, alludes to the work of early twentieth-century sexologists and psychoanalysts as enabling the conditions of possibility for sexuality to become the object of historical inquiry.⁸ Nonetheless, he marks a clear separation between the sorts of historical forays made by such figures and the questions posed by historians of sexuality that follow current disciplinary norms. Following the lines of the late twentieth-century social-science dichotomy of essentialism versus construction, he accounts for the difference between past attempts to historicize sexuality and our own as a "fundamental shift in focus" from approaches "rooted in scientific (that is biological or psychological) concepts of the sexual, to a social and cultural reconceptualization."⁹ In this paper, I offer a historical corrective to such views of the relationship between biology and sexological ideas about the past. Medical and sexological histories of sexuality generally bore only a diluted and indirect relation to biological thought. In fact, the distinction currently drawn between biology/science and culture was not apparent to nineteenth-century scholars in the way that it came to be in the late twentieth century. The methods employed by nineteenth-century doctors and sexologists to historicize the sexual past were grounded in modes of textual reading not dissimilar to our own historical methods and much like the methods of other historians in their own time.

The humanistic features of past medical thought are easy for us to overlook, given our location in a time when biomedical training is far more technical and university degrees are far less multidisciplinary than they were in the nineteenth century, and when so few works of scholarship cross the lines between humanistic and scientific modes of inquiry. The standard separation of medical clinicians from the humanities is a recent phenomenon, and it is important to recognize the multidisciplinary of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European doctors who frequently studied foreign and ancient languages, history, philosophy and literature as part of their core training. The portrait of the early twentieth-century German

⁶Patricia Cotti, "Freud and the Culture Historians: An Escape from the Clinical?" *Psychoanalysis and History* 11/1 (2009), 41–53.

⁷For instance, Ann Clarke, *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* (New York, 2008), 14; Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, 2nd edn (Middleton, 2005), 91–92, 121. See also the characterization of history of sexuality as a post-structuralist innovation in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, "Introduction," in Bonnell and Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Berkeley, 1999), 1–33.

⁸Jeffrey Weeks, *What Is Sexual History?* (Cambridge, 2016), 1.

⁹*Ibid.*, 9.

American psychiatrist Walther Riese evoked by George Mora is a case in point.¹⁰ One of the very earliest works historicizing sexual medicine itself was the 1839 book published by the German physician Julius Rosenbaum, *Die Lustseuche im Alterthume (The Plague of Lust in Antiquity)*, which cited a wide array of classical medical sources in Latin and Ancient Greek to reconstruct the early history of venereal diseases.¹¹ Rosenbaum clearly planned this work as part of multivolume series that was never completed, as indicated by his designation of the 1839 book as an *erster Theil*, which was dropped in later editions.¹² It was translated into English and split into two volumes by the French publisher Charles Carrington in 1901, republished by the University of Virginia press in 1955.¹³ The 1901 version was cited by several of the other early historians of sexuality that will be discussed in this article. Arguably, nineteenth-century doctors thought to pose questions about past human sexual desires and practices, with a view to allowing history to inform their own clinical inquiry, precisely because they were so well versed in history, modern and ancient languages, classical literature, and philosophy.

The new sexual science of the late nineteenth century not only defined particular types of people, as both Foucault and Arnold Davidson eloquently described;¹⁴ it also mapped sexual desires to a specific historical teleology, making the historical past matter in the formation of the concept of sexuality. These engagements took several forms: doctors and psychiatrists read historical texts and constructed ideas about the sexual past toward an understanding of what could, and could not, be considered transhistorical, and historical writers engaged with psychiatry and sexology not only to develop their ideas about the importance of the sexual past, but also to influence the ideas of these clinicians. The relationship between the emergence of sexual science and historical knowledge was thus entangled, dynamic and complex from the very moment the word “sexuality” entered widespread usage because nineteenth-century European medical and psychiatric thought invested the concept with historical content from the very start. Nineteenth-century thinkers’ probing questions about sexuality typically engaged in forms of historicization aimed at distinguishing those expressions of desire they viewed as peculiar to their own contemporary culture from those they saw as inherited from past cultures within a social-evolutionary imaginary. This type of historical comparison formed a consistent habit of thought in many of the medical and psychiatric texts that first enunciated sexuality as a distinct field of meaning.

Sexuality, then, became available as an object of historical inquiry in part because the very concept itself was always historicized. Why is this not more widely recognized? The first attempts to historicize sexuality occurred within medical texts

¹⁰George Mora, “The Beginning of Psychiatric Historiography in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” in Mark Micale and Roy Porter, eds., *Discovering the History of Psychiatry* (New York, 1994), 53–81.

¹¹Julius Rosenbaum, *Die Lustseuche im Alterthume, ester Theil* (Halle, 1839).

¹²The second edition of this same work also contains additional source materials: Julius Rosenbaum, *Die Lustseuche im Alterthume* (Halle, 1845).

¹³Julius Rosenbaum, *The Plague of Lust: Being a History of Venereal Disease in Classical Antiquity*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1901); Rosenbaum, *The Plague of Lust* (Charlottesville, 1955).

¹⁴Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, *La volonté de savoir* (Paris, 1976); Arnold I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

about sexual pathologies, and in anthropological and philological works, not in works clearly indicating themselves as “histories.” And of those works that clearly referred to themselves as histories of sexual matters before World War II, many lacked scholarly rigor by our current standards. Moreover, some of the earliest expressions of sexual historicity supposed a unilinear social-evolutionary template which has since been fully rejected in our current scholarly norms.¹⁵ There are many reasons, then, to wish to disown these past antecedents. However, importantly, it was the inherent historicity of nineteenth-century sexual concepts which nourished the formation of another discourse—the one in which we ourselves participate, that of the history of sexuality. Historians of sexuality, in this view, do not transcend their conceptual object, but are enmeshed within it.

The lack of recognition of sexual-historical ideas of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also appeals to the ongoing sense of rupture from, and disavowal of, nineteenth-century ideas about sexuality itself. Despite Foucault’s mockery of the myth of “Victorian repression,” which he claimed the twentieth century had produced for its own self-satisfaction, many historians continue to reproduce the idea that nineteenth-century medicine categorically denied women the right to pleasure via widespread clitorectomies or discouragement of clitoral stimulation, and that both doctors and the public were especially sexually repressed or inhibited.¹⁶ Scholars of nineteenth and early twentieth-century sexuality such as Thomas Laqueur, Lesley Hall, Roy Porter, Angus McLaren, Peter Cryle, Lisa Downing, Peter Gay, Sean Brady, Ivan Crozier, Chiara Beccalossi and others have shown that contrary to there being a repression of sexual matters, nineteenth-century medicine produced forms of incitement to pleasure, and that there was a wide diversity of views about sex circulating in this time.¹⁷ It was precisely in the mid-nineteenth century that the first medical concepts of pathological lack of sexual desire were also elaborated.¹⁸ But as Hall remarks, “the Victorians have performed and still perform a lot of different tasks in serving the history of sexuality,” and “there is a continuing stereotypical picture of the Victorians as both

¹⁵Michael Swacha, “Against Teleologism: Notes on Reason, Madness and Sovereignty from Socrates to the Foucault/Derrida Debate,” *Diacritics* 44/4 (2016), 66–88.

¹⁶Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 9–22; Lesley Hall, “Clitoris,” in Colin Blakmore and Sheila Jennett, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Body* (Oxford, 2001), 160–62; Alison M. Moore, “Victorian Medicine Was Not Responsible for Repressing the Clitoris: Rethinking Homology in the Long History of Women’s Genital Anatomy,” *Signs: The Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44/1 (2018), 53–81.

¹⁷Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York, 2003); Roy Porter and Lesley Hall, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1650–1950* (New Haven, 1995); Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930* (Chicago, 1997); Peter Cryle, *The Telling of the Act: Sexuality as Narrative in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century France* (Newark, 2001); Cryle, “Vaginismus: A Franco-American story,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 671 (2012), 71–93; Lisa Downing, *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford, 2003); Peter Gay, *Schnitzler’s Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture, 1815–1914* (New York, 2002), 64–94; Sean Brady, *Masculinity and Male Homosexuality in Britain, 1861–1913* (Basingstoke, 2005); Chiara Beccalossi, *Female Sexual Inversion: Same-Sex Desires in Italian and British Sexology, ca. 1870–1920* (Basingstoke, 2012); Chiara Beccalossi and Ivan Crozier, eds., *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Age of Empire* (London, 2011); Alison M. Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity: Sadism, Masochism and Historical Teleology* (New York, 2015).

¹⁸Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago, 2007); Peter Cryle and Alison Moore, *Frigidity: An Intellectual History* (Basingstoke, 2011).

sexually repressed and also as major sexual hypocrites.”¹⁹ The nineteenth century produced not only a vast array of novel concepts about sexuality in general but indeed also some of the first concerted efforts to historicize sexuality. In fact, without its engagements with the sexual past, it is hard to imagine how sexual medicine might have recognized either that sexual mores are not universally shared across time and place or that same-sex relations could be compatible with cultural splendor.

Sexual Social-Evolutionary Ideas in Nineteenth-Century Thought

One reason why nineteenth-century historicizations of sexuality are eschewed as antecedents of sexuality historiography relates to their heavily teleological view of time, in the form of a commonly assumed social-evolutionary template. When we think of social-evolutionary approaches to sexuality that emerged in late nineteenth-century Europe, we tend to imagine them deriving from biological evolutionary thought, either neo-Darwinian or neo-Lamarckian. This was true of specific discussions, such as those concerning the evolution of sex differences, as described by Mike Hawkins.²⁰ Even some of my own previous work has tended to assume that this same genealogy informed the emergent concept of sexuality as well.²¹ Certainly, by the late 1880s we see deliberate engagements with biological evolutionary theories in the development of ideas about sexual pathologies as forms of degeneration, alongside uses of the humanistic teleological claims about sexuality. However, notions of sexuality as something that indicated a culture’s level of social or historical progress in fact emerged between 1860 and 1880, without specific reference to biological evolution. They pre-dated the application of biological models to sexuality and were not dependent upon them. Historical teleological ideas about sexuality had their origins in philological and historical modes of inquiry, not in the application of biology to society, which emerged as a popular discursive trend only late in the nineteenth century, and even then often without particular reference to specific biological thinkers.²²

Hovering in the background of such considerations about sexuality and history were undoubtedly also the European imperial and colonial conquests informing accounts of distant people whom many assumed to be representative of Europe’s own past. In his 1911 work *The Mind of Primitive Man*, the German American anthropologist Franz Boas firmly criticized the unilinear view of social development assumed by so many.²³ But at the turn of the twentieth century, this assumption was still widely held, and probably underpinned many of the conflationations that

¹⁹Lesley A. Hall, “The Victorians: Our Others, Our Selves?”, in Kate Fischer and Rebecca Langlands, eds., *Sex, Knowledge, and Reception of the Past* (Oxford, 2013), 160–76, at 161.

²⁰Such as Patrick Geddes and J. Arthur Thomson, *The Evolution of Sex* (London, 1889), a work concerned with evolution of sex differences, not of sexuality; Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945* (Cambridge, 1997), 249–71.

²¹Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity*, 47–50.

²²Pietro Corsi, “Jean-Baptiste Lamarck: From Myth to History,” in Snaith B. Gissis and Eva Jablonka, eds., *Transformations of Lamarckism* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 9–18, at 11.

²³Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man* (New York, 1911).

sexologists made between extant ethnographic and historical sources.²⁴ Ideas about the bodies and sexual practices of peoples subjected to European colonial rule undoubtedly helped to produce the concepts of primitivity and barbarousness that appeared in both the clinical and the historical imaginary of nineteenth-century sexual science.²⁵ Notably, however, the unilinear assumption about evolving societies that made nineteenth-century thinkers look at other extant cultures as frozen in time was importantly disrupted by the recognition of ancient sexual pasts: several of the more historically informed sexual scientists went against the grain of dominant assumptions about primitive promiscuity, as this paper later considers.

There is a tendency to dismiss any consideration of biological causation in the humanistic study of gender and sexuality today precisely because of its bad reputation of being associated with biological reductionism and colonially inflected social-evolutionary arguments.²⁶ But in the case of the history of sexuality, this reputation is inappropriately attributed to the contaminating force of biology. In fact, a social-evolutionary teleology of sexuality emerged from within the arguments made by those who first considered sexuality as a substantive, discrete object prior to the popularization of biological arguments. In recognizing that such arguments were not particularly inspired by biological thought in the first instance, but as much by humanistic trends such as philology and history that were then part of the training of alienist clinicians, we can reappraise current historiography of sexuality as part of a longer legacy of sexuality historicized from the beginning of its conceptual formation from within humanistic modes of thought.²⁷

The work of the Swiss philologist Johann Bachofen was a crucial influence on several later thinkers in this story. Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (Mother Right) of 1861 presented one of the first theories to propose that different modes of sexual relating were features of discrete stages of historical development. Bachofen proposed that polyamory was the norm of the earliest "tellurian" humans of whom scant historical record was then known.²⁸ The thesis of primitive promiscuity was widely reiterated by numerous philosophical, political and anthropological thinkers of the late nineteenth century, including in the 1870 work of the English anthropologist John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*; in the 1877 work by the American anthropologist Louis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society*; in the German political philosopher Friedrich Engels's 1884 *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats* (The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State); and in the Scottish anthropologist James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* of 1890.²⁹ For

²⁴Funke, "Navigating the Past," 114.

²⁵See Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC, 1995); Veronica Fuechtner, Douglas E. Haynes and Ryan Jones, eds., *A Global History of Sexual Science, 1880–1960* (Oakland, 2018).

²⁶Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham, NC, 2015).

²⁷Jeanne M. Peterson, *The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Berkeley, 1978), 57.

²⁸Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht: Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaiokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Stuttgart, 1861).

²⁹John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man* (New York, 1898); Louis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (Chicago, 1877); Friedrich Engels, *Der Ursprung der Familie, des*

Bachofen, the initial promiscuity was followed by matriarchal oriental structures in which women dominated and humiliated men, followed by a chaotic masculine era, with monogamy, marriage and modern civilization appearing only with rise of ancient Greece and Rome. Bachofen's methods were certainly not biological but grounded in a high degree of humanistic and hermeneutic sophistication. Shortly after the appearance of Bachofen's eclectic work of erudite philology and interpretive mythology, another important thinker located sexual relations at the heart of historicity of another kind, that of biological evolution and sexual selection in the work of Charles Darwin.³⁰ But importantly, Bachofen's ideas about sexual relations representing stages of historical teleology preceded all forms of psychiatric engagement with Darwinian—or any other—theories of biological evolution. If we want to understand the relationship between the emergence of the historicity of sexuality and later psychiatric attempts to map sexual behavior to biological evolution, this relation is not to be found in the very first configurations of sexual history.

Biological evolutionary questions appeared the most formative of historical views about sexuality in the degenerationist trend in European psychiatry of the late nineteenth century, with its predominantly neo-Lamarckian bent. Here the idea was that immoral behaviors of one generation could result in sexual pathologies in the next. Lamarck, of course, never implied any such thing, but the idea gained great traction nonetheless in degenerationist forms of discourse in the last decades of the nineteenth century, alongside vaguely neo-Darwinian claims about reproductive fitness and degenerate races which Darwin himself would also not have recognized.³¹ However, this movement, about which Daniel Pick, Arnold Davidson, Robert Nye, Valerie Rohy and others have written, tended to see inheritance of degenerate traits not as embedded in persistent biological characters, but rather as highly malleable according to behavior, emphasizing the influence of culture on biology.³² The Lamarckian–Darwinian divide played out in the conflict between the followers of the French criminologist Alexandre Lacassagne and those of the Italian Cesare Lombroso.³³ Of all the bastardized evolutionary models competing for authority in late nineteenth-century thought, neo-Lamarckism was the most culturalist. Bachofen's habit of thought that located sexual teleology in historical periodization proved eminently compatible with the Lamarck-inspired degenerationist model for later thinkers like Paul Moreau and Richard von Krafft-Ebing. They considered that if sexual behaviors had once been prevalent in the historical past, these behaviors could well recur atavistically given the appropriate triggers in the patient's own life (or in that of their parents),

Privateigentums und des Staats (Hottingen-Zürich, 1884); James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York, 1922), 154–8.

³⁰Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London, 1871).

³¹Corsi, "Jean-Baptiste Lamarck," 9–18.

³²Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848–1918* (Cambridge, 1989); Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 1–29; Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton, 1984); Valerie Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality* (New York, 2009); Richard W. Burckhardt Jr, "Lamarck, Cuvier and Darwinian Animal Behavior and Acquired Characters," in Gissis and Jablonka, *Transformations of Lamarckism*, 33–44.

³³Nye, *Crime, Madness and Politics in Modern France*, 97–131.

though atavistic claims were also accommodated in neo-Darwinian approaches such as those of Lombroso and of Paolo Mantagazza.³⁴

Much of the general reception of Bachofen's theories of social evolution focused on his central idea that the most ancient human cultures were matriarchal, evolving progressively into the known patriarchal societies of Greek and Roman antiquity.³⁵ That aspect of Bachofen's scholarship was heavily debated in his own time, with many male scholars rejecting the idea that fully matriarchal societies had ever existed.³⁶ But as Ann Taylor Allen has shown, Bachofen's ideas were tremendously generative for feminist thinkers at the turn of the twentieth century in the imagination of how the social position of women had developed historically and how it might be transformed.³⁷ While most of these engagements did not discuss sexuality, the British feminist Frances Swiney drew on Bachofen's account to propose that prehistory had been characterized by an era in which male sexual urges had been disciplined by a ruling female elite who controlled reproduction—a vision Swiney sought to manifest again through the League of Isis, which she founded in 1907.³⁸ As Kirsten Leng has shown, German feminist thinkers between 1900 and 1914 such as Johanna Elberskirchen, Anna Rüling, Rosa Mayreder and Mathilda Vaerting also embraced Bachofen's matriarchy claims to challenge sexological assumptions about women's lesser sexual needs and subordination to men, and about female homosexual desire as degenerate.³⁹ These thinkers, as Leng notes, have been much overlooked in the historiography of sexual science.⁴⁰ However, precisely because of their struggles to gain legitimacy as sexologists in the overwhelmingly male-dominated field at that time, the arguments of German feminist writers about women's sexuality tended to focus less on historical vignettes (apart from a very general evocation of primitive matriarchy), and more on biological claims about sexual instincts which they viewed as holding greater authority.⁴¹

In surveying the explicit uses of Bachofen in psychiatry and sexology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it appears that the specific contours of his historical account were only tangentially significant. It certainly excited the erotic imaginary about dominant and cruel women, providing inspiration for the historian Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's 1870 novel *Venus im Pelz* (*Venus in*

³⁴Rohy, *Anachronism and Its Others*, 45; Chiara Beccalossi, "Madness and Sexual Psychopathologies as the Magnifying Glass of the Normal: Italian psychiatry and sexuality, c.1880–1910," *Social History of Medicine* 27/2 (2013), 303–25.

³⁵Peter G. Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity to the Modern Age* (Leiden, 1994), 350–68.

³⁶Damian Valez, "Bachofen's Rome and the Fate of the Feminine Orient," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70/3 (2009), 421–43.

³⁷Ann Taylor Allen, "Feminism, Social Science, and the Meanings of Modernity: The Debate on the Origin of the Family in Europe and the United States, 1860–1914," *American Historical Review* 104/4 (1999), 1085–1113.

³⁸Frances Swiney, *The Bar of Isis; Or, The Law of the Mother* (London, 1907). See Allen, "Feminism, Social Science, and the Meanings of Modernity," 1102.

³⁹Kirsten Leng, *Sexual Politics and Feminist Science: Women Sexologists in Germany, 1900–1933* (Ithaca, 2018).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 238.

⁴¹Johanna Elberskirchen, *Die Liebe der dritten Geschlechts: Homosexualität, eine bisexuelle Varietät, keine Entartung—keine Schuld* (Leipzig, 1904).

Furs).⁴² But in referring to prehistory about which little could be confirmed, those who wanted their historical observations to carry authority took less interest in Bachofen's teleology. Freud mentioned it in *Totem and Taboo*, conceding that a brief matriarchal stage may have occurred momentarily following the expulsion of the band of brothers from the horde.⁴³ But most of Freud's own teleological views of sexual development and its relation to civilization focused on Greek mythology and on contemporary ethnographic description which he, like many, viewed as replicating primitive humans of the past.⁴⁴ Like Bachofen, Morgan, Frazer and Engels, Freud too considered the original human to be polyamorous—indeed polymorphously perverse.

Overall, Bachofen was less followed in his particular periodization of sexual phases than he was taken as inspiration for a general kind of new historicity of sexuality. The thesis of primitive promiscuity opened a generative avenue of thought in the domain of moral history. Supposing that historically primitive humans exercised no restraint in their desire but that every historical population subsequently sought to control it, many saw the history of sexual morals as elucidating the present state of affairs. Implicit in many such historical investigations were various contemporary problems of how best to govern sexual instincts: who should have the right to divorce and under what circumstances? What kind of erotic texts should be censored? Should abortion or prostitution be prosecuted? And which sexual acts and orientations should be criminalized? Many of the nineteenth-century attempts to situate sexual desires and behaviors in history followed from the reasoning that the sexual historical record was relevant to such contemporary moral considerations.

The Irish historian William Lecky was one of the first to grapple with the sexual past as a troubling problem. His 1869 *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* devoted a chapter to "The Position of Women."⁴⁵ Here Lecky commended ancient Greece for developing monogamous marriage, reflecting a "superiority to the Asiatic civilizations that preceded it."⁴⁶ Barbarism, he thought, systematically abused women as slaves and as sexual objects for the gratification of men's "animal passions," and both philosophical reason and Christian morality had suppressed these lower aspects of human nature.⁴⁷ He alluded most coyly to ancient Greek homosexuality and prostitution as constituting "one of the most delicate" problems for those seeking to understand the relationship between morals and civilization. He concluded that Greek civilization had prospered despite the extramarital sexual practices of its men, and that "however much moralists may enforce the obligation of extra-matrimonial chastity, this obligation has never

⁴²Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus im Pelz: Novelle* (Leipzig, 1890; first published 1870).

⁴³Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913), trans. James Strachey, in Freud, *Standard Complete Works*, vol. 13 (London, 1950), 14–283, at 144.

⁴⁴Robert Kenny, "Freud, Jung and Boas: The Psychoanalytic Engagement with Anthropology Revisited," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 69/2 (2015), 173–90.

⁴⁵William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, 2 vols. (New York, 1868).

⁴⁶Ibid., 2: 294.

⁴⁷Ibid., 2: 292.

been even approximately regarded.” Better, though, that such desires be discouraged since “the first condition of an advancing civilization in populous countries is to restrain or diminish them.”⁴⁸ This idea in turn echoed the remarks of Immanuel Kant, who in the 1786 *Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte* (Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History) engaged with the Book of Genesis, reasoning that “the first incentive for man’s development as a moral being came from his sense of decency,” and that covering the genitalia “showed the way from purely animal desire to love, and so also from a feeling for the merely agreeable to a taste for beauty.”⁴⁹ The idea that sexual containment gave rise to civilization in all its intellectual and artistic splendor hovered in the background of many nineteenth-century questions about sexuality in the historical past from Lecky to Krafft-Ebing to Freud. But as settled as this moral resolution appeared, it opened as many new questions as it answered: which parts of sexual desire must be rescinded, and to what extent must they be so? If this was indeed how civilization had had been purchased, at what moment did the transaction occur? And was it necessary to repeat it continually in order to sustain civilization once already established? Did every culture undergo the same process of sexual containment at the same point of development?

From Alienism to Sexology: Configuring the Perverse Past

As the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault argued, the rise of nineteenth-century sexual medicine represented a marked shift from the generation of sexual knowledge as *ars erotica* (erotic artistry) that had prevailed in European cultures since the early modern period to one of *scientia sexualis* (sexual science), with its neologisms, taxonomies and novel descriptions of psychopathology.⁵⁰ It was also the moment in which the very word *la sexualité* appeared ubiquitously in French medical texts, sexuality in English ones, and *die Sexualität* in German (*die Geschlechtlichkeit* gaining ground only in the early twentieth century), with steady increases in the prevalence of all these terms occurring throughout the second half of the twentieth century. But the shift was not only related to the object of knowledge as a specific nominal thing. There was also a change in the kind of disposition and intellectual induction required of those who made such judgments about the sexual desires and practices of others. Doctors became not merely servants of the unwell but confessors of their deepest secrets, revealing even to those who did not see themselves as afflicted that pathology was the explanation for their impulses.⁵¹ As such, they considered it their business to develop expansive understandings of human possibility toward the accurate identification of universal instincts which meant that information about historical sexual behavior took on a novel salience.

Many subsequent attempts to place sexuality in history appeared in some of the earliest medical writings on sexuality. Many of these writers fixated on the Roman

⁴⁸Ibid., 2: 298.

⁴⁹Immanuel Kant, “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History” (1786), in *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd edn, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, 1991), 221–34, at 224.

⁵⁰Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*, 90–93.

⁵¹Ibid., 87–93.

past just as Bachofen had done. Rome here became a symbol of the negative effects of pagan barbarism on sexuality, and of the need for both Christianity and modern civilization. The French alienist physician Paul Moreau (referred to as Moreau de Tours), who was elected a member of the Parisian Société médico-psychologique (Medico-psychological Society) in 1877 and who authored one of the first major psychiatric texts on sexual pathologies in 1880, relied on precisely this kind of historical evocation.⁵² This early work on the psychiatry of sexual perversion contained a full sixty-four-page chapter entitled “Historique.”⁵³ Afflictions of the “genital sense,” he claimed, were not of recent origin and had appeared at different times throughout history in epidemic proportions: “Recall the orgies, the nameless debaucheries that Rome witnessed under the reign of the twelve Caesars!”⁵⁴ He offered a detailed “historical sketch” of the question, noting that such was “full of interest” to clinicians. Clearly, he had not concocted such dark tales simply to serve his own purposes since the evidence was there in history itself (“l’histoire est là”).⁵⁵

The authority of history was invoked here toward several aims. Most explicitly, it served to normalize the study of sexual aberrations: psychiatrists could not be accused of imagining perverts where there were none, since such individuals could be found in the historical record of other times and places. But with the marked condemnation that alienists typically brought to bear on the sexual past, it is also apparent that such illustrations served to justify the moral virtues either of modern civilization and law, or of the Christian faith, both of which constrained incest, homosexuality and polyamory. Moreau began with a long quotation from the mid-century doctor Jean-Baptiste Félix Descuret, describing sexual “libertinage” as an eternal problem of mankind since the flood that God had inflicted on his creation to rid it of iniquity. In Sodom and Gomorrah *l’impudicité* (shamelessness) persisted:

The Orient, now a foyer of corruption, soon infected the rest of the world: Athens, like Babylon, erected idols to the phallus or to Priapus ... Sodomy spread throughout Greece; the schools of the philosophers became houses of debauchery ... In Rome, the leaders of the empire, tiring of ordinary pleasures, resorted to the vilest means to satisfy their brutality ... The ancient world was but a temple of lust.⁵⁶

Moreau wholeheartedly agreed with this account of the ancient history of sexuality, albeit without himself referencing biblical mythology. But what he found particularly striking was that in each such case of moral decadence in which people “throw themselves with abandon into illicit pleasures that are against nature,” it was the very same “practices and instrumental inventions” which reappeared every time. “Hebrews, Egyptians, Chinese, Greeks, Romans, all the people of

⁵²Paul Moreau, *Des aberrations du sens génésique* (Paris, 1880).

⁵³Ibid., 11–75.

⁵⁴Ibid., 8. All quotations translated into English from Moreau’s text are by Alison M. Downham Moore.

⁵⁵Ibid., 10.

⁵⁶Ibid., 12. The citation is from Jean-Baptiste-Félix Descuret, *La médecine des passions* (Paris, 1841), 479–80.

Europe, and undoubtedly also those of the new continent, at every age of the world, all fall into the same sexual aberrations.”⁵⁷ Only later in the book are these recurring aberrations explicitly revealed: masturbation, nymphomania, male same-sex relations, incest and bloodlust.

Moreau’s historical sketch proposed a periodization divided into three eras: antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times (with fluctuating levels of sexual aberration in each stage). In evoking Roman pleasure in cruelty, he alluded to the emerging concept of sadism, without so naming it here since that was a term on which alienists (psychiatrists) settled only in the final decade of the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ In Moreau we see a heavy leaning upon the tendencies of the Roman historian Suetonius (69–126 CE), who attributed each Roman emperor’s decline to sexual impotence or impropriety, typically by suggesting that the emperor was not sufficiently penetrative according to the ideal of Roman manliness.⁵⁹ But for Moreau, the Suetonian accounts of Roman sexual mores held another even more sinister meaning: they indicated how even great civilizations could fall prey to a genetic slide into a particular kind of decadence which others by now were calling “degeneration.”⁶⁰ Although Moreau did not use this term, he described the mechanism at play through inheritance in a lengthy sketch of the Roman imperial family tree.⁶¹ Of Valeria Messalina he remarked that she was an example of a “sort of contagion that is communicated through one’s descendants.”⁶²

Many of the major works that elaborated a psychology of sexuality or a medical description of sexual pathologies over the period from 1880 to 1910 included a similar discussion of sexual practices and desires in history. The concept of sadism was one that was developed with particular reference to the historical past. The neologism first appeared in French in the *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française* of 1834 to refer to “aberrant and appalling debauchery.”⁶³ In the same year, the theatre critic Jules Janin likened the notorious Marquis de Sade to the Roman emperor Nero and also to the notorious medieval lord and murderer Gilles de Rais.⁶⁴ The term “sadism” was further cited by the French alienist Alexandre Briere de Boismont, who had helped found the Société médico-psychologique in 1852, and both he and Paul Moreau’s father, the alienist Jacques-Joseph Moreau, debated whether lustful cruelty was a product of excessive civilization or decadence (as Briere de Boismont thought) or whether atavistic

⁵⁷Moreau, *Des aberrations du sens génésique*, 12.

⁵⁸Alison Moore, “The Invention of Sadism? The Limits of Neologisms in the History of Sexuality,” *Sexualities* 12/4 (2009), 489–506.

⁵⁹Julie P. Hallett, “Making Manhood Hard: Tiberius and Latin Literary Representations of Erectile Dysfunction,” in Mark Masterson, Nancy Sorokin Rabinowitz and James Robson, eds., *Sex in Antiquity: Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World* (London, 2015), 408–21.

⁶⁰Bénédict Augustin Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humain* (Paris, 1857).

⁶¹Moreau, *Des aberrations du sens génésique*, 17–23.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 30.

⁶³Pierre-Claude Victor Boiste, *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française, avec le latin et les étymologies: extrait comparatif, concordance, critique et supplément de tous les dictionnaires français; manuel encyclopédique de grammaire, d’orthographe, de vieux langage, de néologie, etc.* (Paris, 1834), 225.

⁶⁴Jules Janin, “Le Marquis de Sade,” *Revue de Paris* 11 (1834), 347.

degeneration was responsible.⁶⁵ A doctoral thesis on Gilles de Rais defended in 1885 by the Vendée abbot Eugène Bossard focused on the pleasure-killing, rape and torture described in the medieval trial records of Rais.⁶⁶ The Viennese psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in 1886 appears to have borrowed the idea of naming a perversion after Sade from Brierre de Boismont, and paired it as the opposite perversion to his other literary neologism “masochism,” named after the Austrian historian and novelist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, who was his colleague at the University of Vienna.⁶⁷ By the 1890s, psychiatrists in Germany, Austria, France, Russia and America were discussing sadism as a pleasure in cruelty that hailed from barbarous times—Rome or the Middle Ages. Its recurrence in modern times therefore signaled atavism.

While there is no doubt that French-speaking doctors were particularly inclined to read historical sources toward an emergent degenerationist sexual historicity, the trend appeared also in Germanic, Italian and anglophone sources of the late nineteenth century. The renowned Viennese psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing drew upon the familiar Greek, Roman and Babylonian sketches to surmise that his own time was an important improvement on the sexual debasement of the past. His account developed a teleology similar to Moreau’s, with a linear path toward progress characterized by sexual restraint. In what was probably the most widely read work of nineteenth-century sexual psychiatry, Krafft-Ebing’s 1886 *Psychopathia Sexualis*, there is a historical outline provided in the introduction which frames the problem of sexual perversions and pathologies squarely within the new historicity. Krafft-Ebing evoked the protective role of Christian morals in the relatively orderly state of sexual relations among nineteenth-century Europeans (presumably aside from the individuals he himself claimed to treat):

In comparing the various stages of civilization, it becomes evident that, despite periodical relapses, public morality has made steady progress, and that Christianity is the chief factor in this advance. We are certainly far beyond sodomitic idolatry, the public life, legislation and religious exercises of ancient Greece, not to speak of the worship of Phallus and Priapus in vogue among the Athenians and Babylonians, or the Bacchanalian feasts of the Romans and the privileged position held by the courtesans of those days.⁶⁸

Islam, he thought, stood further back on the teleological line despite Mohammed’s attempts to raise the status of women from that of mere chattel.⁶⁹

⁶⁵“De l’influence de la civilisation sur le développement de la folie.” Discussion: Moreau (de Tours), Brierre de Boismont, Alfred Maury, Delasiauve, Gerdy, Ferrus, Archambault, Cerise, Baillarger, Parchappe, Belhomme (Séances des 30 aout, 27 Septembre, 29 Novembre et 27 Décembre 1852), *Annales medico-psychologiques* 5 (1853), 293–319, at 293.

⁶⁶Eugène Bossard, *Gilles de Rais, dit Barbe-Bleue, 1404–1440* (Paris, 1885).

⁶⁷Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity*, 26.

⁶⁸Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der conträren Sexualempfindung: Eine medizinisch-gerichtliche Studie für Ärzte und Juristen*, 12th edn (Stuttgart, 1903); Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-forensic Study*, trans. Franklin S. Klaf (New York, 1998), 3. All English quotations and page references, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the latter source.

⁶⁹Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 3.

Here we might consider the backdrop of the demise of the Ottoman Empire at this time. As both Khaled El-Rouayheb and Dror Ze'evi have shown, colonial evocations of Ottoman homosexuality and polygamy were a feature of many late nineteenth-century claims about that empire's degeneration, which underpinned Western European geopolitical agendas relative to the Balkans and the Middle East.⁷⁰ The relative liberty of European women here was taken as a sign of Europe's greater civilization (which might seem baffling to us today when we consider that most European women then had no right to vote, attend university, seek divorce or use public lavatories!).

But although Krafft-Ebing cited the "stages of civilization" and referred to modern Christian societies as more morally developed than both Muslim and indigenous ones, he also viewed decadence and decline as recurrent dangers to all great civilizations. Sexual morals did not necessarily advance in a steady progress toward greater and greater refinement, because they were constantly in danger of corruption and could relapse into iniquity via the overstimulation of city life. This indeed was one of the reasons why the industrial world needed psychiatry. Sexuality was in his mind both a sign and a cause of this threatening decadence: "The episodes of moral decay always coincide with the progression of effeminacy, lewdness and luxuriance of the nations ... Exaggerated tension of the nervous system stimulates sensuality, leading the individual as well as the masses to excesses."⁷¹ Here sexual aberration appears as a sign or symptom of civilizational faltering. But further, "The material and moral ruin of the community is readily brought about by debauchery, adultery, and luxury. Greece, the Roman Empire, and France under Louis XIV and XV are striking examples of this assertion."⁷² Here it seems that sexual behaviors could also act as a cause, in and of themselves, of the decline of monarchies and empires.

It is not clear if Krafft-Ebing had read Bachofen, though Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, after whom Krafft-Ebing coined the term "masochism," certainly did so.⁷³ Krafft-Ebing categorically rejected the view, shared by Bachofen and many subsequent others, that equated primitivity with sexual excess and amorality. He remarked, "It is a remarkable fact that among savages and half-civilized races sexual intemperance is not observed (except among the Aleutians and the Oriental and Nama-Hottentot women who practice masturbation)."⁷⁴ He noted that his own opinion was minoritarian and that among those who disagreed with him were Gerhard Friederich, Cesare Lombroso and Iwan Bloch.⁷⁵ Later, Sigmund Freud too would make the notion of polymorphous perversity, within the psychoanalytic schema, the first primitive stage of social evolution which modern Europeans had introjected into their own developing psyches.⁷⁶ Krafft-Ebing's

⁷⁰Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago, 2009), 2–3; Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900* (Berkeley, 2006), 149–65.

⁷¹Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 3–4

⁷²Ibid., 4.

⁷³Gilles Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: Le froid et le cruel* (Paris, 2007), 62.

⁷⁴Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 4.

⁷⁵Ibid., 414 n. 5.

⁷⁶Sigmund Freud, "Der Untergang des Ödipuskomplexes" (1924), in Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 13 (London, 1968), 393–402. This short paper appears in English translation as "The Dissolution of the

periodization in which the first stage of development was naive to perversion did not commonly prevail among psychological theories thereafter, though he found one unlikely ally in the idiosyncratic Swedish Finnish philosopher and sociologist Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939).

In 1891 Westermarck produced his renowned *History of Human Marriage*, based on his doctoral thesis of 1889 at the University of Helsinki. It was rapidly translated into German in 1893.⁷⁷ Westermarck had a deliberate engagement with social-evolutionary thought (especially Spencer, Morgan and McLellan), though he was critical both of Darwin and of Paul Broca.⁷⁸ His account blended zoology, evolutionary theory, anthropological survey and historical inquiry.⁷⁹ Perhaps, of all possible examples, he fits best Weeks's model of how early sexual historicizations were grounded in biological causation. But then Westermarck was clearly also far from being merely biological in his approach and drew his methods as much from history, from Kantian philosophy, and from anthropology as from either evolutionary or zoological ideas.⁸⁰ He shared Krafft-Ebing's doubts about the thesis of primitive promiscuity, and noted the wide variety of marriage practices, incest prohibitions and laws about polyandry across different historical and extant cultures.⁸¹ Krafft-Ebing referred to Westermarck's work in later editions of the *Psychopathia Sexualis*, as well as to the work of other unnamed *Kulturhistorikern* (cultural historians).⁸² In other respects, though, Westermarck represented the countervailing trend to that of Moreau and Krafft-Ebing in that he viewed religion in general, and Christianity in particular, as having distorted the sexual instincts of historical cultures.

History and Sexual Morals

Westermarck joined a growing tide of opinion that had been gathering force throughout the 1880s and 1890s, which considered the historical ubiquity of male same-sex desire in the ancient world to indicate that such desires could not possibly represent a degenerate trait, and that they also could not be considered a practice produced solely by cultural peculiarities. This was a thesis expounded explicitly and at length in Westermarck's other widely read work of 1906, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*.⁸³ He took the sexual practices of ancient Greece to be more instructive toward contemporary sexual politics than those of the Romans, drawing moral conclusions from the trend that had been emerging

Oedipus Complex," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (London, 1995), 661–4. See Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity*, 55–79.

⁷⁷Edward Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1891); Edvard Westermarck, *The Origin of Human Marriage* (dissertation) (Helsingfors, 1889); Edward Westermarck, *Geschichte des menschlichen Ehe, aus dem Engl. von L. Katscher und R. Grazer* (Jena, 1893).

⁷⁸Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, 274, 284–7.

⁷⁹Juhani Ihanus, *Multiple Origins: Edward Westermarck in Search of Mankind* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998).

⁸⁰Cotti, "Freud and the Culture Historians," 49–50.

⁸¹Westermarck, *History of Human Marriage*, 51–113.

⁸²Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia*, 12th edn, 4.

⁸³Edward Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas* (London, 1906).

throughout the nineteenth century in which studies of ancient Greek homoerotic literature and Platonic philosophy appeared as contradictions to the emergent psychiatric descriptions of homosexuality as a pathology.⁸⁴ Among those arguing in favor of homosexual rights similarly on the basis of classicist scholarship were the British orientalist/explorer Sir Richard Burton, the German legal reformer Karl Ulrichs, and the English classicist and cultural historian John Addington Symonds.⁸⁵ Symonds had labored for ten years on his short history of Greek homoerotic literature and philosophy, which he first published privately in 1873, entitled *A Problem in Greek Ethics*.⁸⁶ This work concluded that the rise of Rome signaled a shift from Greek love to Roman lust and violence. Christianity had sought to repress it all, but medieval chivalry had redeemed some of the ancient spirit of love: “Not in escape into the cloister, not in the self-abandonment to vice, but in the fellow service of free men and women must be found the solution of social problems.”⁸⁷ He clearly also saw his own historical revelations about sexuality as a stick with which to beat the psychiatric pathologizing thinkers like Moreau, Schrenck-Notzing and Krafft-Ebing, as indicated by the subtitle of his work, which indicated that it was “addressed especially to medical psychologists and jurists.”⁸⁸ But as Jana Funke notes, Symonds also engaged meaningfully with the emergence of sexual science, later collaborating with the British sexologist Havelock Ellis and developing his own ethics of adult homosexual relations in response to the concerns of psychiatrists about pederasty.⁸⁹ Ellis too appeared to value the dialogue and viewed knowledge of the sexual past as complimentary to the investigations of sexual science, as indicated by his discussion of historical examples in the 1897 work *Sexual Inversion*.⁹⁰

Alistair Blanshard notes that male same-sex practices of the historical past, particularly those of ancient Greece, were integral to the emergence of homosexual rights in nineteenth-century Europe, and that “examples from the past were taken as invaluable data for early sexual theorists.”⁹¹ Daniel Orrells too notes how important was knowledge of classical antiquity for the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century “systematization and taxonomization of sexuality,” to which our current categories of meaning are still indebted.⁹² From a nineteenth-

⁸⁴Blanshard, “Queer Desires and Classicizing Strategies of Resistance,” 25–44.

⁸⁵Richard F. Burton, *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights' Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night; with Introduction and Explanatory Notes on the Manners and Customs of Moslem Men and Terminal Essay on the History of the Nights*, 16 vols. (Stoke Newington, 1885–1888), 10. See Dane Kennedy, *The Highly Civilized Man: Richard Burton and the Victorian World* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, *Forschungen über das Rätsel der mann-männlichen Liebe* (Leipzig, 1898).

⁸⁶John Addington Symonds, *A Problem in Greek Ethics, Being an Inquiry in the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion, Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists* (London, 1910; first published 1873).

⁸⁷Ibid., 72–3.

⁸⁸Ibid., title page.

⁸⁹Jana Funke, “‘We Cannot Be Greek Now’: Age Difference, Corruption of Youth and the Making of Sexual Inversion,” *English Studies* 94/2 (2013), 139–53.

⁹⁰Ibid., 148. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 2, *Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia, 1915; first published 1897), 1–64.

⁹¹Blanshard, “Queer Desires and Classicizing Strategies of Resistance,” 30.

⁹²Orrells, *Sex*, 1.

century classicist point of view, if the civilization prized as the most reasoned in history had thrived in the context of permitted homosexual relations, then the contemporary criminalization of such relations made no good sense at all. As Harry Oosterhuis has shown, that tide of opinion affected even some of the more morally conservative psychiatrists and is reflected in Krafft-Ebing's shift in the 1890s, following his dialogue with Karl Ulrichs, toward a more sympathetic view of homosexual men, whom he now insisted were not degenerate.⁹³ In 1897 Krafft-Ebing signed the German Reichstag petition led by Magnus Hirschfeld for the repeal of Paragraph 175, which criminalized homosexuality.⁹⁴ Historical understanding thus had a real impact on modern sexual science, as well as on the formation of modern sexual-rights movements. It is clear both that psychiatrists took a great interest in historical sources, and that historians engaged with sexological texts. The relationship between them has thus always been richly entangled, not blockishly linear as in the view that early sexology constituted a precondition for the later emergence of sexuality historiography. In fact, it seems that historical understanding of the sexual past was part of a complex web of ideas that gave rise to sexual science in the first instance.

Certainly, not all works of late nineteenth-century sexual medicine included historical chapters, and some of the major figures in emergent psychiatry such as Auguste Tardieu, Jean-Marie Charcot and Albert Moll appeared to take much less interest in the sexual past. But there are enough examples of it nonetheless to consider that there was a powerful element of historicity in the very emergence of the field of knowledge as it related to sexuality. The nature of these engagements with the past was highly varied, ranging from uses of it to demonstrate the rectitude of the moral and legal status quo, or to justify sexology's elaboration of perversions, to deployments aimed at critiquing the pathologization and criminalization of specific desires. Like Moreau, the renowned Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso took the Roman example of Messalina as described by Tacitus as instructive toward a degenerationist view of female sexual behavior, and wrote about early modern figures of artistic genius as historical examples of psychiatric pathologies.⁹⁵ The Swedish physician Anton Kristen Nyström was another who included several historical chapters in his 1901 German work *Das Geschlechts-Problem* (The Sexual Problem), rendered in English in 1906 as *The Natural Laws of Sexual Life*.⁹⁶ These included a chapter on ancient Greek, Roman and early Christian sexual practices; a chapter on medieval witchcraft; several chapters on the history of Christian ascetic practices of sexual abstinence; a chapter on marriage and courtship in ancient Babylonian, medieval European, early modern Chinese and

⁹³Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago, 2000), 139.

⁹⁴Robert Beachy, "The German Invention of Homosexuality," *Journal of Modern History* 82 (2010), 801–38, at 819.

⁹⁵Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *La Donna delinquente: La prostituta e la donna normale* (Turin, 1893), 397, 446; Lombroso and Ferrero, *L'Uomo di genio in rapporto alla psichiatria* (Turin, 1894).

⁹⁶Anton Kristen Nyström, *Das Geschlechts-Problem* (Berlin, 1901). This German edition claims to be the 7th, but no earlier versions of precisely the same text appear to have survived in any language. Anton Kristen Nyström, *The Natural Laws of Sexual Life: Medical-Sociological Researches*, trans. Carl Sandzen (Kansas City, 1906).

nineteenth-century Japanese cultures; and a chapter on “Marriage in Modern Times” that began with the Protestant Reformation. His account, too, implied that Christianity (particularly Catholicism) had largely repressed natural instincts, often violently (as in the witchcraft trials) and always morally through its condemnation of sexual sins.

The German psychiatrist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, too, included a chapter on “The History and the Development of Contrary Sexual Feeling among the Ancients” in his 1892 work, reprinted in multiple languages and editions, *Die Suggestions-Therapie* (translated into English as *Therapeutic Suggestion on Psychopathia Sexualis*).⁹⁷ He considered homosexuality in ancient Greece to have been culturally transmitted through pederasty and viewed it as patently pathological in modern times. The Swiss neurologist Auguste Forel made chapter 6 of his widely read 1906 work, *La question sexuelle* (The Sexual Question), about the “Ethnology and History of the Sexual Life of Man and of Marriage.”⁹⁸ He paid great respect to Westermarck in several places throughout the book, recognizing him as one of the two most important influences on his own account, the other being Krafft-Ebing.⁹⁹ It was important, he noted, not only to base historical knowledge on the use of sure and verifiable sources; it was also crucial that any current moral assumptions about sexual relations be subject to scrutiny via the study of as many different historical examples as possible.¹⁰⁰ Whichever way they argued the most primitive sexual mores to work or how linear they took civilizational progress to be, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century psychiatrists all appeared to agree that history showed a differentiation of sexual mores across time and place, further rendering sexuality available as an object of historical investigation.

The German sexologist and dermatologist Iwan Bloch (1872–1922) was one author who exploited the possibilities of historicizing sexual mores to such an extent as to cast serious doubt upon current assertions about historiography of sexuality as a scholarly trend appearing only in the second half of the twentieth century. Bloch’s 1906 work *Das Sexualleben unserer Zeit in seinen Beziehungen zur modernen Kultur* (The Sexual Life of our Time in Its Relations to Modern Civilization), in which the term *Sexualwissenschaft* (sexology) first appeared, included numerous historical observations of a similar kind to those made by Krafft-Ebing, though without the moral condemnation of past licentiousness.¹⁰¹ Bloch was a cofounder with Magnus Hirschfeld of the Berlin Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for Sexual Science), and shared Hirschfeld’s anti-pathological and non-degenerationist view of sexual variations. But Bloch was more than just a clinician—he was also indisputably a literary and anthropological historian. His 1904 study of the Marquis de Sade under the pseudonym Eugène Dühren, which involved the retrieval of an entirely lost source, Sade’s manuscript

⁹⁷ Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, *Die Suggestions-Therapie bei krankhaften Erscheinungen des Geschlechtssinnes mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der conträren Sexualempfindung* (Stuttgart, 1892). See Schrenck-Notzing, *Therapeutic Suggestion on Psychopathia Sexualis with Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Feeling*, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock (Philadelphia, 1895), 123–44.

⁹⁸ Auguste Forel, *La question sexuelle exposée aux adultes cultivés* (Paris, 1906), 154–203.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, 157, 201, 591; 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁰¹ Iwan Bloch, *Das Sexualleben unserer Zeit in seinen Beziehungen zur modernen Kultur* (Berlin, 1906).

of the *120 Days of Sodom*, as well as his 1906 study of Rétif de la Brétonne, indicated a far more serious historical disposition than any of the contemporaneous sexologists who thought about sexuality historically.¹⁰² Sigmund Freud referenced Bloch in several places throughout his opus, and it seems likely that Bloch was one of those Freud counted among the “cultural historians” to whom he referred anonymously in his 1905 *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality).¹⁰³ Here Freud noted the value of *die Kulturhistoriker* in assisting psychoanalysts to determine which forms of sexual desire were transhistorical (and therefore likely to be instinctive) and which were culturally specific, as Patricia Cotti notes.¹⁰⁴ It is also possible that Bloch himself saw a value in his historical investigations for the same reason, and that his discovery of a wide variety of sexual practices in the historical past informed his anti-pathological view of sexual variations in his own time.

In particular, Bloch's seven-hundred-page 1901 work *Das Geschlechtsleben in England (A History of English Sexual Morals)* represented a significant attempt to historicize sexual practices within a specific past culture for no apparent purpose related to the instrumentalization of the past in the service of the present, as we might say of Moreau's and Krafft-Ebing's approaches, or even of Ulrichs's and Symonds's. The work included chapters on English women and on marriage; several chapters on prostitution, including one on child sex-trafficking; one on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century libertinism (debauchery); one on the use of aphrodisiacs; one on flagellation erotica; one on homosexuality; one on sadism and masochism; one on fetichisms; and separate chapters respectively on erotic literature, theatre and art.¹⁰⁵ To be sure, this work falls short of current scholarly standards, frequently trading on salacious titillation by recounting stories of aristocratic infidelities and indiscretions. It also includes little critical discussion of the source corpus from which much of the information was derived, but the same could be said of many works of political and economic history published in this same period which are nonetheless credited by historians of historiography.¹⁰⁶ Bloch's engagement with existing historical scholarship was consistent with scholarly norms of his time, and there are references to the work of Henry Thomas Buckle, Thomas Babington Macauley, Hippolyte Taine, Georgiana Hill, W. Alexander, Thomas Wright, John Timbs, F. Somner Merryweather, Thomas Pennant and numerous others. There is also no doubt that Bloch saw himself as making a serious attempt to open up new lines of historiographic inquiry, as indicated in the introductory remarks in this book which complained that English history was dominated by

¹⁰²Eugène Dühren (Iwan Bloch), *Neue Forschungen über den Marquis de Sade und seine Zeit: Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Sexualphilosophie de Sade's auf Grund des neuentdeckten Original-Manuskriptes seines Hauptwerkes 'Die 120 Tage von Sodom'* (Berlin, 1904); Iwan Bloch, *Rétif de la Bretonne: der Mensch, der Schriftsteller, der Reformator* (Berlin, 1906).

¹⁰³Sigmund Freud, *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (Leipzig and Vienna, 1905), 34.

¹⁰⁴Cotti, “Freud and the Culture Historians,” 41–53.

¹⁰⁵Iwan Bloch, *Das Geschlechtsleben in England, mit besonderer Beziehung auf London* (Charlottenburg, 1901); Bloch, *A History of English Sexual Morals*, trans. William Forstern (London, 1936).

¹⁰⁶For instance, Donald Kelley, *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga* (New Haven, 2003), 254–79. Kelley's work, against the grain of much historiographic scholarship, also includes discussion of late nineteenth-century amateur historical writing.

“histories of particular localities ... cities, villages, and even individual buildings ... but books dealing with morals and manners of the English people can be numbered on the fingers of one hand.” A history of morals must surely deal with matters sexual.¹⁰⁷

The First Sexual Histories

Bloch’s history of English sexual mores cannot be dismissed on the ground that we might claim for other sexological historical vignettes, which were not primarily historical works but descriptions for the purposes of elucidating clinical etiology. Bloch’s text, like Westermarck’s, was frankly called a “history” and appeared to have no other agenda than the retrieval of past sexual mores from specific cultural contexts toward a better understanding of human sexual possibility. The titillating tales and gossip-like tone of his writing form the clearest expressions of its difference from current scholarly historical norms. It is not, as Weeks imagines, that sexological histories were biologically reductive, nor even that they always instrumentally served the professional interests of medical clinicians. Rather, they did often fail to separate the genres of erotica, medical description and history, and to observe our current disciplinary boundaries between history, anthropology and philosophy. It is this blurring of genres that makes the work of Westermarck, Bloch and others appear unacceptable for the current canon of sexuality historiography. But excluding them produces its own historical misconception about the origins of sexuality historiography in the idea that no one had thought to make sex an object of historical investigation until sometime between 1970 and 1980.

There is no doubt that such works have in part been ignored in many recent attempts to historicize sexuality historiography precisely because they were produced outside the academy as it was constituted in European universities at that time. This was true of many of the historical works written by American and English women in this period, as described by Bonnie G. Smith in the *Gender of History*, such as those of the Strickland sisters, Lydia Maria Child and Margaret Fuller.¹⁰⁸ It was also true of whole swathes of works in the genre of cultural history written around this time in France, Finland and other places.¹⁰⁹ The French librarian and historian Alfred Louis Auguste Poux, who wrote under the name Alfred Franklin, is a case in point. He too skimmed close, at times, to writing a form of history of sexuality in his multivolume series *La vie privée d'autrefois* (Private Life in Olden Times) of 1887–1902, a work which considered table manners, culinary practices, medicines, marriage, birth and baptism, the use of animals, hygiene and toilet practices, dress, furnishings, parenting relations, personal grooming, shops, games, toys, and popular entertainment in French history from the fifteenth

¹⁰⁷Bloch, *A History of English Sexual Morals*, vii–viii.

¹⁰⁸Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

¹⁰⁹Heli Rantala, “Towards the Inner History of the Nation: Defining ‘Cultural History’ in Nineteenth-Century Finland,” *Cultural History* 6/2 (2017), 119–40. Alison M. Moore, “Historicising Historical Theory’s History of Cultural Historiography,” *Cosmos & History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 12/1 (2016), 257–91.

century to the late nineteenth.¹¹⁰ Franklin was a prolific amateur historian whose numerous works focused on topics such as the history of Paris and of Parisian morals and customs, the history of libraries, the history of medieval arts and professions, and the history of etiquette. These were topics which were largely deemed unworthy of historical attention by most university historians until the later *Annales* school, but which appealed widely to middle-class reading publics at the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹¹

Sexuality was elaborated *de novo* by psychiatrists and doctors from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century with reference to a marked historicity and was, from this very moment, subjected to serious historical scrutiny by a variety of eclectic intellectuals. Nonetheless it appeared beyond the pale for university historians until after World War II. The prevalence of pseudonyms among those who did write histories of sexuality before this time suggests why it probably could not be easily broached by university professors: it was disreputable. It is in this sense that factors commonly recognized as giving rise to sexual histories—feminism, the sexual revolution, women’s history—softened judgments toward those who wished to make such matters their focus.

One possible explanation for the current ignorance among many historians and historical theorists of the earlier attempts to historicize sexuality described here is that while this intellectual urge was present between 1861 and 1906, perhaps it died out sometime in the early twentieth century, entering a dormant phase from which it was only awakened sometime after the 1970s. But in fact, other works continued to appear through the interwar and postwar periods, notably that of the German philologist Paul Brandt, who wrote under the pseudonym Hans Licht, and who produced an elegant history of Greek homoerotic literature in 1921, *Die Homoerotik in der griechischen Literatur* (translated as *Sexual Life in Ancient Greece*); and the many works of the prolific British amateur historian George Ryley Scott, such as his *History of Prostitution from Antiquity to the Present Day* (1936), his *Phallic Worship: A History of Sex and Sexual Rites* (1941), and his *Curious Customs of Sex and Marriage: An Inquiry Relating to All Races and Nations from Antiquity to the Present Day* (1953).¹¹² Rattray Taylor’s *Sex in History* also appeared in 1953 and claimed to trace the emergence of a long historical “pattern” of social control over sexual drives that began in the

¹¹⁰ Alfred Franklin, *La vie privée d’autrefois: Arts et métiers, modes, moeurs, usages des Parisiens, du XIII^e au XVIII^e siècle d’après des documents originaux ou inédits* (Paris, 1887–1902), 17 vols.

¹¹¹ Alfred Franklin, *Étude historique et topographique sur le plan de Paris, de 1540, dit plan de tapisserie* (Paris, 1869); Franklin, *Moeurs et coutumes des parisiens en 1882: Cours professé au Collège de France pendant le second semestre de l’année 1882 par Alfred Mantien* (Paris, 1882); Franklin, *Les rues et les cris de Paris au XIII^e siècle: Pièces historiques publiées d’après les manuscrits de la Bibliothèque nationale, et précédées d’une étude sur les rues de Paris au XIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1874); Franklin, *Histoire de la Bibliothèque Mazarine: Depuis sa fondation jusqu’à nos jours* (Paris, 1860); Franklin, *Histoire de la bibliothèque de l’abbaye de Saint-Victor à Paris d’après des documents inédits* (Paris, 1865); Franklin, *Dictionnaire historique des arts, métiers et professions exercés dans Paris depuis le treizième siècle* (Paris, 1906); Franklin, *La civilité, l’étiquette, la mode, le bon ton, du XIII^e au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1908).

¹¹² Hans Licht (Paul Brandt), *Die Homoerotik in der griechischen Literatur* (Bonn, 1921); George Ryley Scott, *A History of Prostitution from Antiquity to the Present Day* (London, 1936); Scott, *Phallic Worship: A History of Sex and Sexual Rites* (London, 1941); Scott, *Curious Customs of Sex and Marriage: An Inquiry Relating to All Races and Nations from Antiquity to the Present Day* (London, 1953).

Middle Ages and was cemented in the nineteenth century. An introduction by Weston La Barre to the American edition the following year claimed Taylor's work to be "the first book to trace and evaluate society's changing attitudes toward sex and to show how these varied attitudes have influenced civilization."¹¹³ Taylor's book made no mention of Westermarck, Bloch or George Ryley Scott, so it seems that this claim to novelty was based largely on ignorance, just as similar claims have been made about sexual historiography of the 1970s and 1980s. As Stephen Garton notes, Licht's and Taylor's studies contained implicit critiques of modern Western sexual morals which they saw as failing to serve natural human drives, and indeed this motivation appears implicit in many of the earlier works of Bloch and Westermarck as well.¹¹⁴

The 1959 article in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* entitled "The Double Standard" by the Oxford historian Keith Thomas appears to have been the first scholarly article in history of sexuality accepted into an academic history journal.¹¹⁵ It claimed to historicize the idea that men and women are judged differently for unchastity but also excelled as a work of historical scholarship on the history of attitudes toward prostitution and on the history of unequal divorce and property rights in English history of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. It stands up well by current standards as a fine example of contextual intellectual history. Thomas's study drew on a large corpus of primary sources but also referred to a few relevant works by other historians, those of Iwan Bloch, Edvard Westermarck, William Lecky and Gordon Taylor.¹¹⁶ It seems that in the 1950s it was still possible (even without the Internet) for a careful academic historian to locate these earlier examples of sexuality historiography that have more recently largely fallen into neglect, or perhaps it was simply still possible to imagine that there actually would be any such examples to look for.

To be sure, the teleological assumptions embedded in many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to historicize sexuality strike us today as beyond the pale as a result of our academic norms in the humanities of contempt toward unilinear visions of progress and toward the general idea of social evolution. But it is also worth considering whether our own sense of rupture and difference from these earlier works may not in itself replicate a teleological habit of denigrating the past in the service of our own hubris. Such reductions of the historiographic past may admittedly be more consequential for works of historical theory and historiography than for the ongoing praxis of writing histories of sexuality. However, pretending that no one had the urge to historicize sexuality before the late twentieth century supports a denial of our more embarrassing intellectual heritages. Blaming later biological reductionism for social-evolutionary ideas that were constituted in humanistic thought produces a failure to appreciate how historical error was itself part of the development of what sexuality historians are now doing. To accept this is, of course, to invite vulnerability in the

¹¹³Weston La Barre, "A Pioneer Study," in Gordon Rattray Taylor, *Sex in History* (New York, 1954), 1–2, at 2.

¹¹⁴Garton, *Histories of Sexuality*, 2.

¹¹⁵Keith Thomas, "The Double Standard," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20/2 (1959), 195–216.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 196.

thought that our own conceptual follies may one day be such an embarrassment to later historians. It is thus in our interest to be gracious toward past historical endeavors.

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