

Sex, Ethics and Psychology: The Networks and Cultural Context of Albert Moll (1862-1939)

Veranstalter: Centre for the History of Medicine and Disease, Durham University

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Albert Moll was acknowledged by his contemporaries as a pioneer of sexology as well as a leading author on hypnotism and parapsychology. However, he was also mocked as a „medical Sherlock Holmes“ and „God’s ethicist“. At the time, Moll was known to a wider public in Imperial and Weimar Germany as well as an internationally recognised author. Between the late 1880s and 1933 Moll was one of the key figures of medical culture in Berlin and a prominent expert witness in court. He contributed to topics ranging from medical ethics to sexology, medical psychology, hypnotism, parapsychology and occultism. Today, however, Moll’s contribution to the development of the modern understanding of sexuality, psychology and medical ethics is largely forgotten and overshadowed by the likes of Sigmund Freud or Magnus Hirschfeld.

The international conference on *Sex Ethics and Psychology: The Networks and Cultural Context of Albert Moll (1862-1939)*, organised by the Centre for the History of Medicine and Disease at Durham University, was a first initiative to look at the work of Albert Moll from a broader historical perspective. It brought together scholars from Australia, the USA, Russia, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK to discuss the relevance of Moll’s contributions to the development of new fields of knowledge in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The conference started with a panel on „Parapsychology and Occultism“. HEATHER WOLFFRAM (Brisbane) discussed Moll’s criticism of occultism, starting from the Rudloff-Moll trial of 1925. Hermann Rudloff, the husband of the medium Maria Vollhardt, had taken Moll to court for allegedly defamatory

comments about his wife in Moll’s 1924 book *Der Spiritismus (Spiritism)*. The case received wide publicity in both occultist circles in Germany and the wider public. Wolfram showed how Moll’s criticism of parapsychology had shifted in the 1920s from earlier scientific criticism of occult practices to a pathologisation of spiritists. She interpreted this shift as symptomatic for Moll’s frustration with the lack of impact of his rational critique and a change in tactics resulting in more personal attacks on the main protagonists of German occultism.

ANDREAS SOMMER (London) analysed the relationship between Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, one of the leading German parapsychologists, and Moll. Until the 1900s the two men had been close collaborators in investigating paranormal phenomena and had a shared interest in establishing parapsychology as a reputable area of research. Later, however, Schrenck-Notzing’s occult beliefs and Moll’s fierce criticism of such views opened an unbridgeable gap between the two, which was reflected in Moll’s polemic attacks on spiritism after the Great War. Sommer interpreted this divide as the result of one branch of psychical research contributing to the making of psychology as a science, which marginalised spiritist beliefs in the academic discourse. For Moll with his scientific worldview occultist beliefs had become a deviant epistemology which had to be firmly rejected.

The second session on „Medical Ethics“ was kicked-off by HOLGER MAEHLE (Durham), who talked about Moll’s medical ethics in theory and practice. His talk outlined the principles of Moll’s *Ärztliche Ethik (Medical Ethics, 1902)* and demonstrated that Moll’s idea of a contractual relationship between patient and doctor formed the core element of his ethics. In the second part of his paper Maehle contrasted Moll’s ethical theory with his involvement in debates about human experimentation in Prussia around 1900 and the so-called ‘patient-trade’ scandal in Berlin in 1909-1910, where leading clinicians had been accused of paying bonuses to agents for providing them with lucrative private patients. He concluded that while elements of Moll’s medical ethics could be regarded as progressive in anticipating aspects of, for

example, patient autonomy, they had little immediate impact. His *Ärztliche Ethik* did not share the success of his other publications and his interventions in ethical matters had no long-term consequences for those involved.

BOLESлав LICHTERMAN (Moscow) then discussed the reception of Moll's medical ethics in Russia, the only country where translations of *Ärztliche Ethik* were published in 1903 and 1904. He compared the two translations with the reception of Vikenty Vere-saev's *Zapiski vracha* (*Confessions of a Physician*, 1901), an account of the shortcomings of Russian medicine at the turn of the century, its neglect of the poor and unethical practices. Lichterman discussed the criticism of Moll's ethics as bourgeois ethics for private practitioners against the background of communal health care in rural Russia. He also showed how Moll's books, especially the 1903 Moscow edition of *Ärztliche Ethik*, were adapted to the requirements of Russian doctors.

In the following session on „Collective Identities and Personal Animosity“, ROSA REICHER (Heidelberg) tried to understand Moll's biography in the context of Jewish identities in Imperial and Weimar Germany. She described Moll's conversion to Protestantism as typical for German Jews in the nineteenth century who intended to overcome the stigma of Judaism and assimilate into German society.

The first day ended with a discussion of VOLKMAR SIGUSCH's (Frankfurt am Main) paper on Moll's relationship to Sigmund Freud and Magnus Hirschfeld. Sigusch characterised the relationship between Moll and Freud as defined by mutual dislike and the controversy about the priority of the „discovery“ of childhood sexuality. Moll's relationship to Hirschfeld was equally difficult. While Moll regarded himself as a scientific sexologist, he accused Hirschfeld of using scientific research in the interest of political campaigning for sexual reform. The quarrel between the two men culminated in Moll's denunciation of Hirschfeld in 1934 of an unspecified misdemeanour that allegedly had forced the latter into exile.

The second day of the conference focused

on sexology. The first panel on „Normal and Deviant Sexualities“ started with a paper by HARRY OOSTERHUIS (Maastricht) who discussed the work of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Moll as key contributions to sexual modernity. He argued that a more psychological understanding of sexuality and a move of the focus away from the reproductive nature of sex was essential in this development. Although many of Moll's ideas could already be found in the work of his mentor Krafft-Ebing, his original contribution was to bring them together in a coherent theory of sexuality that recognised sexual diversity and regarded sexual activity beyond the immediate reproductive function of sex not as deviant but as normal.

Normalising sexuality was also the theme of the contribution by LUTZ SAUERTEIG (Durham), who talked about Moll's ideas about childhood sexuality. He showed that the idea of childhood sexuality as normal and not necessarily pathological was already outlined in Moll's *Libido sexualis* (1897) and embedded in a discourse on child sexuality at the end of the nineteenth century. Moll developed his theory several years before Sigmund Freud accepted sexual practices of children as normal part of their development. However, although Moll published one of the earliest comprehensive accounts of child sexuality in 1909, Freud became widely regarded as the „inventor“ of normal childhood sexuality. Sauerteig explained Moll's failure as a result of the success of Freudian psychoanalysis as well as Moll's repetitive writing style and the fact that Moll's position was rather at the fringes of academia.

THOMAS SCHMUCK (Leipzig) then discussed the ideas of the Russian biologist Ilya Ilyich Mechnikov about human sexuality in contrast to Moll's theories of sexuality. He described Mechnikov's evolutionary account of sexuality which was based on the fundamental principle of harmony. Within this context Mechnikov understood, with reference to Moll, deviant sexual practices as disharmonies in nature.

In the afternoon session on „Sexology in Practice“ MATTHEW CONN (Iowa City) shed light on another aspect of Moll's work as expert witness in court. He showed how

Moll's expertise as one of the leading sexologists of Weimar Germany made him an often called on expert witness in trials of sex offences. Based on this reputation, Moll became a key figure in the arena of the court room. Conn argued that experts such as Albert Moll successfully used the public stage of the court room to shape sexual knowledge. He used trials for homosexual sex from the 1920s to demonstrate this „scientification of the sexual and the social“ (Lutz Raphael).

The final paper of the conference by THOMAS BRYANT (Lüneburg) on 'Sexological deliberation and social engineering' looked into Moll's involvement in debates on sterilisation in Weimar Germany. He focused on Moll's criticism of Gerhard Boeter's call for compulsory sterilisation in the interest of racial hygiene in the 1920s. Moll acknowledged the validity of eugenic research and did not reject eugenics in principle. However, he rejected the implementation of eugenic policies because of the questionable interpretation of data they were based on as well as their ethical implications.

The final discussion showed that many of the issues addressed during the conference in relation to Albert Moll's work were reaching far beyond merely biographical topics. He made significant contributions to emerging fields of knowledge around 1900 such as psychology and sexology. These new disciplines not only changed the academic landscape, but reshaped modern understandings of human nature. However, Moll's failure to become recognised as a key figure in any of his areas of studies is remarkable. His unattractive prose, confrontational attitude, but also his failure to obtain an academic position at a German University and the success of others such as Freud and Hirschfeld are factors which help to explain this.

It was agreed that further studies of Moll's work are needed to draw a more detailed picture. There are still gaps in the understanding of Moll's work on hypnosis and his contributions to medical psychology as well as his international reception and networks, especially his relation to Havelock Ellis, who edited some of his work in English. With this prospect of the need for further research on Albert Moll being necessary and benefi-

cial for a better understanding of modern sexology, (para-)psychology and medical ethics two productive days of discussions ended.

The conference was sponsored by the Wolfson Research Institute, Durham University, and the Wellcome Trust, London.

Conference Overview:

Parapsychology and Occultism

Heather Wolffram: „Trick“, „manipulation“ and „farce“: Albert Moll's critique of occultism

Andreas Sommer: Pathologising the occult: Moll, Schrenck-Notzing, and the creation of anomalistic psychology

Medical Ethics

Holger Maehle: The medical ethics of Albert Moll: theory and practice

Boleslav Lichterman: Russian critics of *Aerztliche Ethik*

Collective Identities and Personal Animosities

Rosa Reicher: Beyond integration and modern self-identification: Albert Moll and his Jewish heritage

Volkmar Sigusch: The sexologist Albert Moll in relation to Sigmund Freud and Magnus Hirschfeld

Normal and Deviant Sexuality

Harry Oosterhuis: Sexual Modernity in the works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll

Lutz Sauerteig: Moll and the invention of childhood sexuality

Thomas Schmuck: Inconsistencies and disorder of human sexuality: Mečnikov's views on sexuality by comparison to Moll

Sexology in Practice

Matthew Conn: Moll as Witness: sexologists and expert testimony in Germany, 1890s-1930s

Thomas Bryant: Sexological deliberation and social engineering: Albert Moll and the sterilization movement in late Imperial and Weimar Germany

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