

Sexuality in History. An Interdisciplinary Graduate Workshop

Veranstalter: Anouk Everts, University of Cologne; Merle Ingenfeld, University of Cologne / Carleton University, Ottawa

Datum, Ort: 16.03.2021–16.03.2021, digital (Köln)

Bericht von: Kathrin Lachenmaier, Universität zu Köln

The international and interdisciplinary graduate workshop¹ was held online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Participants from various fields of the humanities presented research centered on how ideas and concepts of sexuality are presented in their respective disciplines. Furthermore, the presentations examined how one can appropriately address and convey such historically changing and culturally entangled concepts to a broader public.

GUILLERMO DÍAZ DE LIAÑO DEL VALLE (Edinburgh) opened the first panel on expressions of modern gender and sexual dynamics reflecting on his ethnographic participant observation. He assessed gender dynamics at an archaeological excavation site. In his discussion, he drew parallels between hegemonic masculinity as depicted in pop-cultural references to archaeologists as male, adventure-seeking agents of colonial endeavors with the actual practices enacted at an excavation. The stereotypes were perpetuated in that women were harassed or deemed weak. He concluded that while his presence as a male researcher had already initiated discussions on gender, he sees the necessity to advocate for gender equality in archaeology.

MARIA WIEGEL (Cologne) drew a connection between the advice Helen Gurley Brown gave the „single girl“ in the 1960s and tips that women’s magazines offer today. She argued that while the phrasing shifted, both sources ultimately do not truly promote female empowerment but rather actively play into the male gaze and expectations. However, of late, a post-feminist neo-liberal style is starting to be promoted, which encourages women’s responsibility for their spouses’ happiness and „have it all,“ meaning being glamorous, fit,

and athletic, and successful. Thus, Wiegel summed up that current discourses in magazines and TV are generally reproducing patriarchal ideals of the 1960s rather than promoting modern feminist ones.

SELINA FOLTINEK (Bayreuth) presented research on queer female representations and constructions of and by American queer female authors in a diachronic analysis spanning 1859 to 1987. She used queerness as an analytical tool in the knowledge that terminology surrounding female same-sex relationships and their depictions and negotiations in literature was subject to change over time but is characterized through its rejection of hegemonic heteronormativity and establishment of boundary-transgressing spaces. Thus, she argued, female queerness has a long tradition in literature and has always carved out space within the then-contemporary literary forms and discourses.

LEONIE RUESCH (Bern) examined discourses on sexuality in the two Yugoslav youth magazines „Mladost“ and „Start“, which were formative between 1956 and 1979. She argued that socialist Yugoslavia’s case is of specific interest since it received little attention because research rarely exclusively focused on Yugoslavia but was instead directed towards the Eastern Block in general. Although the country foregrounded women’s emancipation and decriminalized homosexuality already in the 1970s, her research showed that these popular youth magazines reinforced heterosexual concepts. While „Start“ focused on such a perpetuation, „Mladost“ posited reproductive acts as normative by marking others as deviant. Assessing the concept of a sexual revolution in this context, she argued that the idea might rather be programmatic than analytic, and the transfer onto the Yugoslav case rather unsuitable.

The second panel on pre-modern sexualities opened with ANOUK E. EVERTS’s (Cologne) presentation on the erasure of female sexuality in the context of historical and

¹ The conference has been organized by members of a project that has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 713600 – a.r.t.e.s. EUmanities. For details, see the project’s website: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/203182/de>.

archaeological narratives. When researching the mass-produced and, thus, widely available female figurines of Hellenistic Egypt that expose their sexual organs, she observed that they are most often attributed fertility and rarely connected to female pleasure in academic discourses. While not arguing that the interpretation of fertility-related figurines is inaccurate, Everts argued that this is an incomplete view of the significance of these figurines. One of her points of interest was the assumption of pregnancy for the so-called Baubo figurines. This assumption, as Everts stated, is based on the somewhat obese belly of the figure but does not take into account other interpretations that might be equally valid. Thus, she argued for a re-assessment of female figurines as displaying sexuality and pleasure rather than merely categorizing them as „fertility figurines.“

ALEXANDER THIES (Bern) addressed the discursive construction of female ruler sexualities, presumed to be written by male authors, in Late Antiquity, focusing on the Roman Empress Theodora. Counter to the custom, she was not of noble descent, educated, or passive in her demeanor. Since sources on sexuality and gender from the 3rd to the 6th century are scarce and often biased, and contemporary concepts are not entirely appropriate for this period, he approached the topic by examining the discrediting political discourses that painted her as an uneducated, nymphomaniac, socially inappropriate empress. Thies concluded that Theodora was deliberately constructed as non-woman as a form of criticism by depicting her as (sexually) active.

In JAN LUKAS HORNEFF's (Dresden) presentation, the theoretical construction of the duality between the active male and the passive female reoccurred in the context of Roman philosopher Apuleius's court speech. In ancient Rome, gender constructs were rooted in this dichotomy of active vs. passive or, more explicitly, penetrator vs. penetrated. Horneff argued that the defamatory strategy to humiliate an opponent was to construct the person as effeminized. In his defense speech Apuleius, who had been effeminized previously, reframes his opponent as passive by equating the latter's filthy language with a

dirty mouth. The dirty mouth displays the ultimate feminization, Horneff concluded, since it is caused by cunnilingus, where the accused male is the one penetrated and who, furthermore, had been seduced by a (passive) female.

ADRINA SCHULZ's (Zurich) paper on the movement-based terminology with which female sex workers were described in early modern Zurich opened the panel on commercial sexuality and eroticism. Tying in with previous presentations, the active-passive opposition characterizing gender was still present during this period. As documents from the city's marriage court from the 1530s to the 1740s show, female sex workers were described as the active partner and characterized through either their lewd gestures or movement pattern towards specific locations. Meanwhile, the defense portrayed their male clients strategically as passive to counter the dominant discourse of the active male. Thus, Schulz argued, female sex workers were deemed deviant due to the ascribed activeness and perceived simultaneously as non-women and the extreme form of every woman.

MAX GAIDA (Cologne) assessed how women's apparent rescue from prostitution and alleged slavery in New York City and Los Angeles' Chinatowns were instrumentalized by two American women, Donaldina Cameron and Rose Livingston, to further their political agendas during the early 20th century. He argued that while superficially, the rescue of these women was well-intentioned, the underlying motivations may not have been entirely selfless and contributed to increasing anti-Chinese sentiments: Cameron forcibly converted the rescued Chinese women to Christianity and held them captive in her mission. At the same time, Livingston fueled the fear of Chinese men by portraying them as evil enslavers of women. Thus, Gaida concluded that Chinese women were exoticized, and the supposedly selfless acts by the American women might have also harmed the women's rights movement, complicating research on sexuality in historical contexts.

Through the analysis of police files and a 1947 lecture by Anton Walitschek, a police commission member, NORA LEHNER (Vi-

enna) demonstrated with which terminology and means sexual labor in Vienna was described and what challenges and limitations she encountered in her research. Most documents were produced by male-dominated institutions and, thus, reproduce their discourse surrounding commercial sex. Lehner highlighted how Walitschek employed derogatory language in describing women engaging in clandestine prostitution as „asocial,” „work-shy,” and „extremely cunning.” Additionally, the laws were somewhat ambiguous so that they could be applied to all females deemed deviant. Another limitation of such documents, Lehner stated, tied into Foucault’s thesis that only those who come in contact with power leave a trace while other women and their perspectives are mainly absent.

PAUL M. HORNTRICH (Vienna) discussed the case of Willi Forst’s film „The Sinner” („Die Sünderin”) from 1951. Based on this film, he attempted to reconstruct a contemporary understanding of pornography in post-war Vienna. Although the film did not depict sexual acts explicitly, its engagement with prostitution was met with outrage by conservative and Catholic organizations. In his critical discourse analysis, Horntrich uncovered how politicized the debate was. While the film was a commercial success, and the juvenile court declared it void of obscenity, the Austrian People’s Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP), with ties to the Catholic church and the women’s movement, condemned it. Concluding, he stressed that definitions of pornography are context-specific and can reflect moral fears in a period’s discourse.

HELENA RUST (Zurich) discussed the increasing use of European concepts of sexuality in Arab publications on sexology between the 1900s and 1940s, which coincided with the erasure of the ones rooted in the respective Arabic culture. The backdrop to this narrowing of discourses favoring European concepts was the already sexualized discourse of Orientalism and its ideological intertwinement with colonialism. Drawing on Joseph Mas-sad’s book „Desiring Arabs,” who criticizes the universality that concepts of sexuality and sexual orientation of European origin have gained in the Arabic world, Rust subsumed

the tensions that resulted from the imposition of European sexuality, on the one hand, and a longing for a return to pre-colonial and thus „authentic” concepts, on the other hand, under the „abyss of authenticity.”

MERLE INGENFELD (Cologne/Ottawa) also discussed the challenges concerning terminology in writing a history of conversion therapies in Germany and the United States, encompassing the period between the late 1920s and the late 1970s. Not only is there no unified terminology on the topic available, but concepts of sexuality and categories in queer theories were also subject to diachronic changes and context-specific connotations. What is more, discourses on conversion therapy span both scientific and religious contexts. What complicates matters further are the various, often controversial, media representations. Overall, Ingenfeld concluded that the field lacks comprehensive definitions. However, despite the varying terminology and discursive sites, she argued that the related practices are all based on the same pathologizing notions and, therefore, best be addressed together.

The panel ended with a presentation by FABIAN HENNIG (Mainz) on the terminologies and motivations surrounding male sexuality in male contraceptive research by Swiss physician Martha Voegeli. She was presumably the first to test and apply the thermal temporary male sterilization method (TMS) on men in India. As Hennig argued, Voegeli was less focused on questions surrounding sexuality and pleasure. Instead, her motivation was to gain approval of her research from the Catholic Church and to contribute to population control in developing countries. In relying on terms such as „virility” to describe male sexuality instead of accentuating sexual self-determination, she tapped into the dominant discourse of maleness as activeness – also discussed in previous presentations – to achieve the aforementioned goals, Hennig concluded.

The vivid discussions after each panel, together with a prolific final round of exchanges, attested to the productiveness of the workshop. It became apparent that many aspects, such as the dichotomic construction of gender based on activeness and passive-

ness, prevailed diachronically and informed discourses in ancient Rome and the Late Antiquity up to the discourse surrounding male contraception in India in the 1950s. More generally, various papers demonstrated the constructed property of sexualities and gender and how they can be instrumentalized to other, criticize, or exoticize the respective person who is deemed deviant. The participants agreed that working within historical contexts of the past requires a sensibility similar to research on topics in contemporary non-European cultures. Thus, sharing experiences is highly fruitful. All in all, the workshop underlined the importance of critical engagement with the topics at hand yet highlighted that there is a variety of effective ways to present disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and wider audiences with research to broaden the understanding and social centrality of the topic.

Conference overview:

Panel 1: Expressions of Modern Gender and Sexual Dynamics

Guillermo Díaz de Liaño del Valle (University of Edinburgh): Triggering Emotions. Reactions to the Study of Gender in Archaeological Fieldwork

Maria Wiegel (University of Cologne): „How to be Sexy“. Female Sexuality in Women's Magazines and Beyond

Selina Foltinek (University of Bayreuth): „Queer“ Horizons of Female Same-sex Desire in a Diachronic Perspective

Leonie Ruesch (University of Bern): A Sexual Revolution, Socialist Style? A Historical Analysis of Discourses on Sexuality in the Yugoslav Magazines „Mladost“ and „Start“, 1956-1979

Panel 2: Pre-Modern Sexualities

Anouk E. Everts (University of Cologne): Fertility and Erasure of Female Sexuality in Historical and Archaeological Narratives. Terracotta Figurines in Hellenistic Egypt

Alexander Thies (University of Bern): Challenging Discourses on Female Ruler Sexualities in the Late Antiquity

Jan Lukas Horneff (Dresden University of Technology): Sex Sells – Gender Structures, Framing and Comic Invective in Roman Rhetoric

Panel 3: Commercial Sexuality and Eroticism

Adrina Schulz (University of Zurich): Deviant Movements. Sex Workers, Sexuality, and Gender in Early Modern Zurich

Max Gaida (University of Cologne): Instrumentalized Sexualities. The Angels of Chinatown Fighting Sexual Slavery

Nora Lehner (University of Vienna): „The women who indulge in clandestine prostitution are extremely cunning...“. Commercial Sex and Processes of Normalization in Post-war Austria through the Lens of Police Files

Paul M. Horntrich (University of Vienna): The Many Meanings of Porn: Willi Forst's „The Sinner“ (1951) and the Reception of Sexualized Media in Early 1950s Austria

Panel 4: Sexology and Modern Concepts of Sexuality

Helena Rust (University of Zurich): The Abyss of Authenticity in Writing a History of Arabic Sexology (1900–1940)

Merle Ingenfeld (University of Cologne / Carleton University, Ottawa): Writing a Transnational History of Conversion Therapies. Challenges and Limitations

Fabian Hennig (University of Mainz): Sexuality in Early Male Contraceptive Research. The Case of Temporary Male Sterilization (TMS) since the 1930s

Tagungsbericht *Sexuality in History. An Interdisciplinary Graduate Workshop*. 16.03.2021–16.03.2021, digital (Köln), in: H-Soz-Kult 12.06.2021.