

The Invention of Heterosexuality

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Heterosexuality, invention of

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The idea of a given, essential, and exclusive heterosexual versus homosexual orientation is a crucial element in the modern understanding of sexuality. These basic sexual categories, which are so familiar to us now, were, however, not current before the late nineteenth century. The notion of heterosexuality emerged at the same time as psychiatrists discovered and labeled a variety of perversions and in particular when the modern idea of homosexuality as a separate category and identity took shape. Just like homosexuality and other “perversions,” heterosexuality, understood as a distinct and exclusive sexual desire for the opposite sex, was a modern construction. The hetero-homo dichotomy signifies a predominantly Euro-American and specific historical arrangement of sexual desire and behavior.

The modern sexual order, which proclaims sexuality as a distinct impulse with its particular internal physical and psychological mechanisms and as the key to individual identity and intimate relationships, replaces some basic traditional understandings of sexuality. Before the nineteenth century sexuality was largely embedded in a fixed natural and moral order. As a function of social and moral behavior, it had no distinct existence, but was instrumentally integrated with marriage, reproduction, kinship, fixed gender roles, social status and power, and economic concerns. Apart from active and passive roles in sexual intercourse, sexual morality was dominated by a reproductive imperative: the crucial differentiation was between reproductive sex within marriage and acts that interfered with it (adultery, sodomy, bestiality, and masturbation) and that were considered as sinful and criminal. Personal sentiment and attraction were of minor importance to the calculus of economic security, social status, and familial advantage in choosing a partner.

The idea of a basic hetero-homosexual dichotomy was introduced by two pioneers of homosexual emancipation. After the German lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895) had coined the terms Urning (a man who is sexually attracted to men) and Dioning (a man whose erotic desire is exclusively oriented to women) in 1862, in 1869 the Hungarian writer Karl Maria Kertbeny (1824–1882) introduced the expressions heterosexual and homosexual. Not much later psychiatrists, who were classifying and explaining the wide range of irregular sexual behaviors they traced, adopted the same terms. From around 1870 a major change took place in the understanding of sexual “deviancy.” In medicine attention shifted from behaviors long regarded as sinful or criminal to the presumed abnormal and pathological traits of the perpetrators. Medical experts on sexuality described different “perversions,” such as homosexuality, fetishism, exhibitionism, sadism, masochism, voyeurism, pedophilia, bestiality, and necrophilia. In the 1890s they also began to refer to heterosexuality as a separate sexual category. Describing heterosexuality as the desire for both sexes (what we would now consider as bisexuality) and the pursuit of sensual pleasure without reproduction, at first they tended to associate it with “perversion.” However, around 1900 heterosexuality took on the meaning of normalcy. The medical-psychiatric understanding of sexual “deviance” paved the way for a new perspective, not only on “perversion,” but also on sexuality in general.

Before Henry Havelock Ellis (1859–1939) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) expressed similar views, the new view was articulated primarily by the German-Austrian psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902), author of *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886–1901), and the German neurologist Albert Moll (1862–1939), author of *Untersuchungen über die Libido sexualis* (1897–1898). In their work sexuality was explained as an intricate complex of behaviors, desires, and passions, of physical as well as psychological functions and of a polar attraction between and mutual complementing of

masculinity and femininity. They began to discuss heterosexuality in the context of nonprocreative sex, which they linked to perversion, but on the other hand they more and more considered heterosexual desire and behavior without procreative aim as normal.

Krafft-Ebing and Moll heralded a new approach to sexuality, not only because they transferred it from the realm of sin and crime to the domain of health and illness, but even more because in their writings the still prevailing reproductive norm was superseded by the recognition of the individual's particular desires and the relational, affective dimension of sexuality. Both suggested that the satisfaction of sexual desire crucially contributed to emotional satisfaction and partnership. Stressing that both love without sexual attraction and sexual pleasure without love were incomplete, Krafft-Ebing and Moll replaced negative attitudes toward sexuality by a positive evaluation of it within the context of the ideal of romantic love. Referring to the bipolar sexual attraction between males and females, they suggested that heterosexual desire, the sensual pleasure of men and women, free from any conscious tie to reproduction, was an essential element of their intimacy. They thus anticipated the increasing sexualization of marriage and love, which after World War I was widely propagated in marriage manuals like Marie Stopes' *Married Love* (1918) and *Enduring Passion* (1928) and Theodoor van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage* (1926).

It was exactly their appreciation of the relational and affective dimension of (hetero) sexuality that contributed to Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's changing view of homosexuality. They were inclined to put the presumed pathological nature of homosexuality into perspective and think that it was more or less the equivalent of heterosexuality, because many homosexuals who had expressed themselves in their case histories, had made clear that partnership was as important to them as sexual gratification. The other perversions, such as fetishism, masochism, sadism, exhibitionism and intergenerational sex, could in themselves hardly be geared to romantic love, because this ideal was based on intimacy, privacy, equality, reciprocity, and psychic communication. In Krafft-Ebing's and Moll's perspective there was also a shift away from a classification of perversions within clear boundaries to a tentative understanding of "normal"

sexuality in the context of deviance. The Freudian notion that the libido consists of "component drives" and that regular heterosexuality is the result of a healthy conversion of various impulses, whereas perversions arise from developmental disturbances, was foreshadowed in their approach.

All of this entailed that Krafft-Ebing and Moll more and more focused on the dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality as the basic sexual categories. They identified other perversions as derived subvariations of the more fundamental hetero-homosexual division. In this way they prefigured that the gender of one's sexual partner—the other (hetero), the same (homo), or both (bi)—would become the dominant feature of the modern sexual order, and not so much the more particular preference for other characteristics of one's sexual partner or for the nature of sexual activities; for example, a preference for certain clothes, body parts, specific objects, or for specific acts or situations. In theory such a fetishistic framework for classifying sexuality would also have been possible. In fact, late-nineteenth-century French psychiatrists, such as Alfred Binet, had tended to consider fetishism as the "master perversion" that included all the aberrations by which sexual desire had fixed itself on the wrong (nonreproductive) goal, be it an object, a body part, a certain act or physical type, a person of the same sex, an unusual age-category, or an animal. By contrast, Krafft-Ebing and Moll as well as Havelock Ellis and Freud highlighted the dichotomy of heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Psychoanalytic theory backed up the notion of hetero- and homosexuality as our basic sexual categories. Although Freud questioned the naturalness of heterosexuality and assumed the existence of an inborn bisexuality, he considered bisexuality as a transitional phase in individual psychosexual development, in which the undifferentiated sexual drives are mentally processed, culminating in a differentiated sexual attraction to either the other sex or one's own. Like Krafft-Ebing and Moll, Freud was ambivalent when it came to evaluating hetero-, homo-, and bisexuality. Although he denied that the homosexual object-choice was pathological, he did not put it on the same level as the exclusive heterosexual object-choice, which continued to be the prevailing norm in psychoanalysis.

The influential survey studies of human sexuality led by the U.S. zoologist Alfred Kinsey and published in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) questioned the hetero-homosexual dichotomy. In Kinsey's behaviorist perspective, the emphasis was not on sexual categories and identities, but on behavior. These studies revealed that homosexual behavior of presumed heterosexuals was quite common while a bisexual behavioral pattern, whereby people with changing intensity engaged in both hetero- and homosexual contacts, was far from rare. Kinsey concluded that heterosexuality and homosexuality are not separate, clearly demarcated categories and that self-definition and behavior did not always perfectly match each other. His gradual spectrum, with heterosexual activities and homosexual ones as extremes and five transitional forms in between, suggested a general bisexual predisposition of human beings. In practice, however, Kinsey's studies did not undermine common-sense thinking about hetero- and homosexuality as exclusive categories. From the 1960s on, the growing visibility of homosexuals, their emancipation, and the development of the gay subculture, particularly for men, did not so much lead to wider acceptance of bisexuality, but to a strengthening of a separate homosexual identity and thus an emphasis on the dichotomy between heterosexual and homosexual.

SEE ALSO: Ellis, Havelock (1859–1939); Freud, Sigmund (1856–1939); Kinsey, Alfred Charles (1894–1956); Krafft-Ebing, Richard Freiherr von (1840–1902); Moll, Albert (1862–1939); Stopes, Marie Carmichael (1880–1958); Ulrichs, Karl Heinrich (1825–1895); Van de Velde, Theodoor Hendrik (1873–1937)

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