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# Centaurus

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*Pathogenic Environments*

*EDITED BY*

PAUL-ARTHUR TORTOSA & GUILLAUME LINTE

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**Alain Giami & Sharman Levinson (Eds.), *Histories of Sexology: Between Science and Politics*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021, xxx + 344 pp., ISBN: 9783030658120.**

If behaviors and feelings that in the course of the 19th century came to be defined as “sexual” have been an object of intellectual and moral concern at least since classical Antiquity, scientific interest in sexuality is much younger. The terms “sexual science” and “sexology” were coined during the 1850s and 1860s in the United States and referred to the understanding of the relation between the sexes. However, the beginning of sexology as a more or less organized field of study, including professional societies, journals, and conferences, happened in Germany in the first decade of the 20th century. In the same period, Freud and his followers organized psychoanalysis into a movement that spread from Vienna to other countries and that overlapped with the broader field of sexology or, as it was also called in Britain, “sex psychology.” From the First World War on, other Western nations also saw the emergence of organized sexology, if not on the same scale as in German-speaking Central Europe. Sexology was mapped out as a multidisciplinary enterprise, including social science and the humanities, but biomedical and psychological approaches prevailed.

The loosely delineated sexological domain was broad, covering anatomical, physiological, gynecological, and biochemical facets; procreation and heredity; marriage and motherhood; demography, birth-control, eugenics, and “racial” or social hygiene; sexual and gender deviance; venereal diseases and prostitution; sexual health and various treatments; education and ethics; legal and forensic aspects; and the socio-cultural and historical dimension of sexuality. Although sexologists shared a strong belief in rationality and positivism, their ambition to establish scientific legitimacy was at odds with efforts to popularize sexological knowledge and to use it for reformist and emancipatory purposes, notably for the benefit of women, homosexuals, and other sexual minorities. Such activism, triggered by practical needs for information, advice and help, would confirm the widespread sense in the scientific world, as well as in society, that research into sexual behaviors and feelings, which were often associated with sensation, amusement, titillation, and pornography, was far from respectable and objective. Sexology was all the more controversial because it approached sexuality as a separate and crucial domain in human life that involved both body and mind, thereby increasingly defining it in terms of lust and pleasure rather than procreation alone. Moreover, sexologists' scientific credentials were

discredited by their empirical dependence on the supposedly dubious reporting of highly subjective experiences and feelings.

All of these dimensions of sexology, in particular its versatility and diverse professional, sociopolitical, and (inter)national contexts, come to the fore in the edited volume *Histories of Sexology*. This collection, which consists of 18 chapters by authors from varied disciplinary and national backgrounds and an introduction by one of the editors, the French sexologist Alain Giami, presents the fruits of an international symposium held in Paris in 2017. Whereas earlier work on the history of sexology has focused on German-speaking Central Europe, France, and the Anglophone world, this collection also includes contributions about Eastern Europe, Spain, and Latin America. Kateřina Lišková, for example, shows how sexology advanced gender equality, the legalization of abortion and anticonception, and companionate marriage in communist Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary; while Marie Walin explains how the medical discourse about sexuality gradually changed the Catholic Church's dealing with impotence as a reason for marriage annulment in Spain. The 20th-century development of Brazilian sexology as an eclectic and politically leftist project is revealed in two chapters by Jane Russo, Sérgio Carrara, and Alessandro Ezabella.

Developments in French sexology are treated in five contributions. Pauline Mortas analyzes how 19th-century French doctors came to understand woman's defloration as decisive turning point in their life, preparing them for childbearing and motherhood against the background of new norms for the sexual behavior of males that involved self-control and the emotional quality of the marriage-bond. More generally, as Gonzague de Larocque-Latour emphasizes in her chapter, demographic and eugenic worries about the declining population and its fitness levels, as well as a preoccupation with proper gender roles, played a crucial role in the early 20th-century emergence of French sexual science. French sexology, like its German counterpart, also paid ample attention to sexual perversion. André Béjin points out, as did several historians before him, that the psychologist Alfred Binet's explanation of sexual fetishism as a perversion, but also as an essential characteristic of "normal" sexual desire, paved the way for a sophisticated psychological understanding of sexuality in general. The shift from a biological to a psychological and psychoanalytic perspective is also outlined by Sylvie Chaperon and Camille Noûs in their study of Marie Bonaparte's work on female frigidity from the 1920s to the 1950s, which was groundbreaking for introducing the female perspective into sexology. Delphine Peiretti-Courtis shows how the specter of "primitive" African sexuality, increasingly described in racist terms, was used for the regulation of interracial sexual relations in French colonies.

Aspects of American sexology are discussed in three articles. Donna J. Drucker elucidates the overlooked role of technology in the late 19th-century medical approach to women's sexuality. Alexandre Paturel, Véronique Mottier, and Cynthia Kraus argue that the conservative backlash against the sexual revolution from the 1980s onwards, which targeted Alfred Kinsey's earlier trail-blazing research in particular, was not only driven by a moralistic-religious agenda, but also by the claim that objective scientific sexology had to be saved from political objectives such as legitimizing




homosexuality and pedosexuality. Stéphanie Pache analyzes how American medical professionals and psy-experts, as well as feminists, have framed sexual violence as a mental health issue. The outcome was that since the 1980s the politicized focus on the structural power imbalance between the sexes has moved to the background, and that social policies in this field were adapted to conservative attitudes towards gender relations, marriage, and family.

Two Swiss contributions include Christian Kaiser's description of Fritz and Paulette Brubacher's program of sexual education and reform in the first half of the 20th century, and Taline Garibian's analysis of how the 1942 decriminalization of homosexuality in Switzerland entailed not so much liberation as a shift to medico-psychiatric surveillance and coercive treatment.

Four chapters go beyond national boundaries. In her essay about the relation between sexology and a French and English novel, Ash Kayte Stokoe compares the different ways in which Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) reflect sexological notions about gender inversion and homosexuality. Jeffrey Escoffier elaborates on the educational and emancipatory function of commercially driven pornography for mass consumption. By showing all kinds of sexual scenarios and incentives for increasingly “perverse” and fetishistic sexual fantasies and excitement since the 1970s, pornography would provide a safe playground for experiencing transgression and expanding the imagination. This may be true, but Escoffier all too easily ignores the repetitive and stereotypical (gender) patterns of mainstream porn. Sharman Levinson argues that, from the 1970s onwards, sexology fundamentally changed by allowing women, gay, lesbian, and transgender people, and other sexual minorities to participate in the production of sexological knowledge. Apart from the fact that he disregards the contributions made by such voices to much earlier sexological studies, this may be an all too optimistic view, as Gert Hekma makes clear in another chapter. Hekma argues that the present LGBTIQ “Alphabet Soup” (referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer) is not so much a revolutionary breakthrough as a continuation of the focus on orientation and (gender) identity, which originated in biomedical and psychological explanations of sexuality starting in the late 19th century. Present-day sexual and gender activism, according to Hekma, is based on *being* rather than *doing*, thereby downplaying the endless range of possible sexual tastes and pleasures. In his view, the Marquis De Sade's approach of highlighting transgressive fantasies and practices, and sexual scripts and staging, provides a better model—an interesting critical perspective that deserves more attention.

The originality and quality of the chapters in this edited volume vary considerably, while the collection as a whole lacks cohesion, largely because of its wide and rather arbitrary geographic scope. Even the central topic, sexology's histories, does not automatically provide a shared frame of reference. The boundaries of the field are stretched so far that any form of (semi-)scientific or expert engagement with sexuality can be included, and this even applies to pleas for pornography (Escoffier) and a radical liberation of sexuality (Hekma), which, perhaps strikingly, actually take a stand *against* sexology. Although the editors characterize sexology as a multifaceted

field shaped by diverse “epistemic communities” (p. 1) and engaged in “boundary work” (pp. xvi, 331), these theoretical notions are not taken up in the chapters and thus remain elusive—just as sexology, as discussed in this volume, seems to escape any demarcation.

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