Introduction

Sex, Politics, Modernity I

Sex was a big problem in twentieth-century Germany. Who should have it, with whom, how often, under what conditions, and for what purposes? What should be done about those who had it under the wrong conditions, for the wrong purposes, the wrong way, with the wrong partners, too often, too early, or too late? When and where should people talk and write about it, to what audiences, and what should they say or not say? From the middle of the 1880s until almost a century later, these were important questions for German politics; in fact, during that century German public life was regularly roiled by intense debates over issues relating to sex and reproduction – over pornography and censorship, prostitution and venereal disease, marriage and divorce, contraception and abortion, the birthrate, homosexuality, and so on. Taken together, these debates constituted one of the most important political and cultural conflicts in twentieth-century German history.

This book examines the first and formative phase of this long struggle to define the role of sex in German society. In the three decades before World War I, Germans had to come to grips with the ways in which very rapid processes of technological, social, and cultural change were transforming sex – for example, by enabling cheap mass reproduction of graphic images (including photographs) and a massive expansion of popular literature, by creating entirely new forms of entertainment like the cinema or recorded music, or by making contraceptives increasingly cheap and available. Very rapid urbanization created a new urban commercial nightlife of new scale, intensity, and character. The growth of the white-collar middle class and rapid upward social mobility, rising working-class incomes, the emergence of a mass working-class movement, and particularly the expansion of women's employment and the sudden growth of the women's movements threw relations between the classes and the sexes into disarray and called into question the sexual power and privilege of middle-class men. Quite suddenly, Germans were confronted with a

question that seemed of enormous importance: what place would and should sex have in a modern society?

The debate over that question generated an enormous volume of spoken and printed verbiage and became virtually inescapable for any member of the educated public. Each of the major ideological and political communities in Germany put sexuality at the core of their anthropology, their conception of what human beings are like and how they relate to each other. At a moment when organizing a working modern society was clearly the question of the hour, this in turn meant that sex seemed a profoundly important and urgent issue. The most popular socialist work in the German Empire, for example, was August Bebel's *Woman under Socialism* (1879), which held that sexual liberation was an integral part of the coming social and democratic revolution. Conservative Christians in both the Conservative Party and the (Catholic-dominated) Center Party saw the patriarchal family, with its clear division of gender roles and its highly restrictive sexual mores, as the foundation of social order and the state. Many liberals saw conservative Christians' attempts to impose their own peculiarly restrictive moral pedagogy (for example, through censorship) as a dangerous and fundamentally tyrannical attack on the freedom of art and of public opinion, both of which liberals regarded as foundational to a free society. The debate over sexual morality and sexual practices was central to the ongoing struggle in Germany in this period over the most fundamental questions of political principle and political organization: over how to define and to secure the freedom of the citizen and over how to guarantee the national power that, most believed, ultimately defended that freedom.

This broad debate over sexuality and politics became increasingly intense, embittered, and continuous over the thirty years examined in this book. That was partly because the social, technological, and cultural revolutions only accelerated over this period. But it was also partly because the debate itself had a dynamic of its own, in which opposing ideas and movements sparked intensifying responses in an escalating cultural and political feedback loop. At the outset the reform of mores and legislation concerning sexuality was the project of a relatively small group of Christian activists, facing both profound hostility to their radical ideas and a powerful taboo against speaking about sex at all. By the turn of the century, a bitter debate over censorship dominated parliamentary business for months on end. Between about 1902 and 1908, there was a massive outpouring of discussion and of organizational initiatives around issues of morality, decency, and reproduction, much of it among ideological communities vehemently opposed to some of the core values championed by conservative Christians. In the five years before World War I, the tone and volume of the confrontation between these different groups and agendas escalated rapidly. By 1912 and 1913, as war loomed, issues of sexual and reproductive behavior were increasingly understood to be central to the question of national power – what constituted it, what it was for, and how to build or preserve it. In that context, issues relating to sexuality, decency, and reproduction were

debated with particular urgency, even fury; and the number and importance of related legislative and administrative initiatives rose rapidly.

This pattern was by no means unique to Germany; very similar debates were fought out throughout Europe, its colonial sphere, and North America. Historians of modern Western societies have therefore long been drawn to the assertion that these debates about sexuality are characteristic of European and American modernity – of societies experiencing the very broad complex of economic, social, cultural, and political changes that reshaped European and American societies between the middle of the nineteenth (or, some argue, the middle of the eighteenth) and the last third of the twentieth century. There is, various historians have suggested, a distinctive connection between sexuality and modernity: a particular transformation of sexuality is one of that broader complex of changes or indeed is constitutive of important social and cultural aspects of modernity.

The single most influential argument of this kind was made by Michel Foucault, who argued at the end of the 1970s that changes in ideas about and practices of sexuality were foundational to the creation of the modern social order in Europe in the two centuries after about 1750. Sexuality as a set of ideas and practices, Foucault argued, was produced and deployed as perhaps the crucial technology of governmentality (how societies govern themselves) from the late eighteenth century onward. The power/knowledge of sexual experts who developed ways of administering life (that is, both individual bodies and populations or demographics) was a new modality of social discipline – a new way of constructing a conceptual and social order that limited, constrained, and defined options for individual and collective behavior – and thus was one of the pillars of a new social order. Foucault's assessment of this new system of discipline, this new mode of ordering society, was extraordinarily grim. He regarded National Socialism as a particularly "cunning" transitional combination of the old regime order of blood (power based on the efficient distribution of death by the sovereign) and the new order of sex (power based on the management of life by experts); mass sterilization, mass public health propaganda, and mass murder were "paroxysms" of the new "disciplinary power" over sex/life, in which a complex of interrelated modern institutions, including both the state and various fields of social science and social work, took upon itself responsibility for managing (improving, purifying, and protecting) the physical qualities of both individual bodies and the entire national population.[1]

Lawrence Birken, writing ten years after Foucault, offered a very different analysis of the relationship between sexuality and modernity. Birken argued that the modern conception of sexuality was directly connected to the emergence of democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The disintegration of a holistic premodern worldview in which different people had

[1] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. I (New York: Vintage, 1990), here esp. p. 149.

particular, different characteristics, rights, and social – and sexual – functions, and its replacement by a new worldview in which all people are characterized by desire and pursue their pleasures in an open market, was foundational to the emergence of the idea of equal and universal democratic, rights-based citizenship. The valorization of desire as universal and productive was central not only to the development of a modern sexual culture but also to the development of the consumer economy (which is founded on desire for things, not for bodies), and thereby to the construction of the political economy of modern democracies. As a transitional ideological formation characteristic of the shift from a protoindustrial economy of scarcity to an industrial economy of abundance, sexology did seek to defend sexual difference and normative "heterogenitality" (Birken's term for the heterosexual family). Nevertheless, its own logic was ultimately and unavoidably a democratizing one; and in three rapid, successive stages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it moved inexorably toward the "extension of the democratic model to the furthest conceivable limit," at which every human being has equal rights, and the desires and needs of every individual are as valid and important as those of every other. The disintegration of restrictive conceptions of sexuality and sexual morality corresponded to, and indeed underlay, the articulation and realization of "a succession of increasingly less restricted, symbolic definitions of citizenship" in the political sense.[2]

The almost exactly diametrical opposition between these two conceptions of the relationship between sex and politics in the modern Euro-American world is symptomatic of a broader divergence in historians' assessment of the political potentials of modern societies. As A. Dirk Moses put it in an essay of 2008, whereas some have seen modernity as a "byword for material and intellectual advancement, national liberation and international peace, individual freedom and enlightenment," others have seen modernity as the age of "racist utopias and totalizing visions of purity, soulless bureaucracy and the omnipotent state."[3] Mark Roseman pointed to the same pattern in 2011: "In rejecting older modernization theories' normative assumptions" about the emancipatory logic of modernity, he suggested, "we have often produced a new moralizing counter-narrative about modernity's 'fatal potential.'"[4]

[2] Lawrence Birken, *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance, 1871–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 95, 133, 132.

[3] A. Dirk Moses, "Genocide and Modernity," in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 157.

[4] Mark Roseman, "National Socialism and the End of Modernity," *American Historical Review* 116 (2011): 688. See also Edward Ross Dickinson, "Biopolitics, Fascism, Democracy: Reflections on Our Discourse Concerning 'Modernity,'" *Central European History* 37 (2004): 1–48; Young-Sun Hong, "Neither Singular nor Alternative: Narratives of Modernity and Welfare in Germany, 1870–1945," *Social History* 30 (2005): 133–153; Dennis Sweeney, "Reconsidering the Modernity Paradigm: Reform Movements, the Social and the State in Wilhelmine Germany," *Social History* 31 (2006): 405–434.

This is a problem that has been particularly acute for historians of Germany, because the disastrous rise and self-destruction of National Socialism has posed the question whether totalitarianism and mass murder are logical or even necessary outcomes of modernization – or not. According to Hans-Ulrich Wehler's influential account based on modernization theory, published in 1969, Germany's disastrous early twentieth-century history was at root the result of Germany's imperfect modernization – the fact that while economy, society, and culture were modernizing rapidly in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its political structure was not.[5] More recently, numerous historians have understood the German catastrophe as a product not of a deficit of modernity but of a particularly virulent form of modernity. The process of economic, social, and cultural modernization was particularly rapid and comprehensive, and hence stressful, in Germany; and this made many Germans especially susceptible to the appeal of radical social engineering projects.[6] Modern German history was, in short, a case study in the dangers of "an extreme form of technocratic reason" and of "early twentieth-century modernity's dark side."[7]

In recent years, a growing number of historians have begun to express dissatisfaction with the tendency toward teleology in both these models. Modern societies, they hold, are very complex and are unlikely to be characterized by any unitary "logic" of development. They have, evidently, multiple and contradictory potentials.[8] Twentieth-century Germany was home to both National Socialism and one of the most successful liberal-democratic welfare states on the planet. Both were modern, in the sense that they built on the whole complex of changes that make up modernization – scientific and industrial development, mass political participation, the growth of the mass media, and so on. With respect specifically to sexuality, modernization leads to the retreat of prohibitions and conventions in sexual life; but it also leads to the expansion of regulation and normalization by experts, agencies, and the media. Reasoning from such dichotomies, some historians argue that the concept of modernity is not a very useful one. As Mark Roseman put it, "the basic ingredients of modernity allow for such massively varying societal outcomes and such huge

[5] Hans Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918* (Dover, NH: Berg, 1985).

[6] See, e.g., Peter Fritzsche, "Did Weimar Fail?" *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996) and "Nazi Modern," *Modernism/Modernity* 3 (1996); Detlev Peukert, "Der 'Traum der Vernunft,'" in *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne*, ed. Detlev Peukert (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989); Detlev J. K. Peukert, "The Genesis of the 'Final Solution' from the Spirit of Science," in *Reevaluating the Third Reich*, ed. Thomas Childers and Jane Kaplan (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1993).

[7] Joan Quataert, "Introduction 2: Writing the History of Women and Gender in Imperial Germany," in *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930*, ed. Geoff Eley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 103.

[8] See Edward Ross Dickinson, "Not So Scary After All? Reform in Imperial and Weimar Germany," *Central European History* 43 (2010): 149–172.

differences between successive epochs as to give modernity very little explanatory power" at all.[9]

This book starts from the premise that there is another, more fruitful question we can ask about the political potentials of modernization – including its sexual-political potentials. We cannot dispense with the terms "modernity" and "modernization," because they are there, as brute historical facts, measurable in statistics on steel production, beer consumption, membership in professional organizations, participation in elections, print runs and circulations, and so on and so forth, endlessly, across all realms of social, economic, political, scientific, and cultural life. But modernity "explains" why particular things happened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries only in the sense that it is the medium in which they happened – a condition, not a cause, of their occurrence. Rather than asking what modernity "causes" (or "explains"), therefore, we really should ask this: what does modernity make possible?

Once we ask this question, the logic of modernity becomes obvious; indeed, the conundrum becomes the answer to the conundrum. What modernity "does" is to generate multiple new possibilities. Modern politics is the reaction to and struggle over the new and complex set of societal choices created by those possibilities. If we give up the job of reducing the complexity of modernity to a unitary, coherent dynamic or logic (as, for example, Birken and Foucault seek to do), then we immediately create a new and much more interesting job for ourselves: to figure out the dynamics of the complexity modernity generates.

This book, then, explores the ideas, social foundations, and development of, and the interactions between, multiple competing movements that championed quite divergent proposals for reformulating the place of sex in German society in response to the transformation of modernization, between 1880 and 1914. The three central findings of the following chapters may be summarized, schematically, as follows.

First, the debate over sexual morality and sexual practices was cast by all participants explicitly in political terms. Sexuality, sexual practices, and sexual morality were understood to be directly and profoundly related to fundamental political principles. In particular, again, sexuality was central to all parties' understandings of how to combine power with freedom, both at the individual level (and even within the person, as psychological characteristics) and in the formal, constitutional sense. Furthermore, sexuality was a political issue also in the sense that different positions in the debate over sex corresponded in very concrete and tangible ways to the interests and agendas of particular social groups – such as the clergy, doctors, teachers, the police, cultural and media entrepreneurs, and so on.

Second, what was of decisive importance in this field was not that the debate was moving in any particular direction, toward any particular crisis or resolution, but rather that it was moving in all directions at once. It was

[9] Roseman, "National Socialism and the End," pp. 700–701, 689.

characterized by the progressively clearer and more forceful articulation of a rapidly proliferating menagerie of positions. And the champions of every one of those positions were able, to one degree or another, to gain leverage on public opinion and public policy (whether at the national, state, or local level, and whether in the courts, in legislative bodies, or through administrative agencies). From the historians' perspective it is this rapid intensification and diversification of the debate and the struggle to control policy that is most significant, not the particular commitments of any one group.

Third, the debate between these rapidly multiplying positions, seen as a whole, was a *dynamic* system. The individual groups and discourses engaged evolved rapidly precisely because they were in dialogue and often confrontation with one another. The conflicts among them intensified their efforts to mobilize their potential constituencies – and their success in doing so. Many of them also shifted ground quite substantially in response to such conflicts, or as they mobilized wider and less homogeneous constituencies. Quite often they fractured as a result of such shifts, generating still further positions and organizations. Ultimately, the fragments began to coalesce again into broader camps or groupings – a development that only further ramped up the intensity of conflict and mobilization. This is the real story of this period. What was most important was not the articulation and advance of inherently dangerous or inherently democratic ideas but the simultaneous and ramifying advance of a large number and variety of ideas, a steady expansion of the dialogue and debate among them, and the escalating mobilization of social groups in support of them. This is the political logic of modernity – a logic of intensifying cultural, social, and political plurality and mobilization.

There is a very substantial historical literature on the politics of sexuality in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany. Most of the intellectual developments, reform movements, legislative debates, and key figures discussed in the following chapters have been the subject at least of a few articles, and often of multiple substantial monographs. Many of these studies, in addition to recounting the history on which they are focused, also draw conclusions about the relationship between their particular objects of study and the wider discussion of the political potentials of modernity. This book is therefore in part a work of synthesis, drawing on this very large specialist literature.

The agenda of this book is different from that of most of these more specialized studies, however. Most of the scholarly literature focuses on particular movements, and often on assessing the political potentials – positive or negative – of particular sets of ideas about sex. This study aims instead to assess the political potentials of the debate as a whole, as a dynamic system. Those potentials cannot be read only from inside individual movements; they were determined instead by the interaction between those movements, by the complexity not of ideas but of the conflicts between ideas.

Examining the activities and ideas of the many groups studied in this book from this fresh perspective – "against" or in parallel with one another, and

with close attention to the broader context of the debate as a whole and to the consequences for their thinking and activism of interactions between multiple different groups – has required systematically going back to the sources, reexamining even publications and archives that have been relatively intensively studied (as well as many that have not). Unfortunately, that has in many cases at least partially obscured my debt to the scholarly literature. Often, for example, I first followed the research trail left by specialists who have examined particular organizations or ideas to the relevant archives, publications, or personalities, and I then built out from there. The reader willing to consult the footnotes will find references to the specialist works I consulted. But of course, in addition, and more broadly, this book builds on, and is a product of, some two or three decades of very active, indeed vibrant, scholarly discussion and research in the modern history of sexuality, and the questions – and excitement – it has generated. In particular, this book has been inspired and informed by the very lively engagement with social theory characteristic of the literature on the history of sexuality (which I have addressed in a number of other publications). But given the aims of this book – to bring to life in a sense an entire world of ideas and organizations, in all its complexity, its interconnections, and its entanglements – the approach taken here is necessarily and deliberately highly empirical.

In particular, this book also deliberately eschews the aim of understanding the relationship of the debate over sex in the 1900s to the origins of National Socialism, or to its rise to power in the 1930s. Again, this has been one of the central concerns of the literature on the history of sexuality specifically in Germany, as well as a focus of interest in the discussion of social theory more broadly. My research has convinced me, however, that the period before 1914 has to be understood on its own terms. World War I was a caesura of enormous importance in German history, specifically too in the history of the politics of sexuality in Germany. But the particular nature of the impact of the war and its consequences (up to and including the Great Depression and Nazism) was determined by the structure of the society that passed through those crises, and by the potentials it harbored. Ironically, therefore, ending this book in 1914 is actually the most effective way accurately to reconstruct the continuities between 1880 and 1933. We must reconstruct the world of 1913 to understand how it differed from that of 1930; and only once we do can we understand why its parts – people, movements, and institutions – responded as they did to the challenges they faced between 1914 and 1929.

This book is divided into three parts. Part I examines the various organizations that championed one or another variety of sexual conservatism in Imperial Germany. Some of these groups, particularly of conservative Protestant men, were formed very early on in the development of the debate over sexual morality, in the 1880s, and persisted right down to 1914; others, particularly of Catholic men, formed after the turn of the century and flourished only in the last six or seven years before the war. These groups are addressed in

Chapters 1–3. A second wave of conservative morality organizations emerged in the 1890s and 1900s; in particular, in this period both conservative religious women's groups and politically and theologically liberal women's organizations transformed the debate over morality. All these groups, and their impact on the ideas of conservative religious men, are addressed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 discusses the successes and failures – in legislatures and city halls, in the courts, and in public opinion – of this broad range of moral conservative organizations.

Part II examines the various organizations that championed one or another – and often quite divergent – varieties of sexual radicalism. Most of these groups formed between the late 1890s and 1905; and most of them also passed through an important period of crisis, adjustment, and radicalization between 1907 and 1910. Chapter 6 examines the evolution of Social Democratic thinking regarding sexual morality, which was foundational for sexual radicalism of all varieties early on and continued to be crucially influential right down to 1914. Chapter 7 examines the homosexual rights movement that took organizational form in 1896/1897. Chapter 8 examines medical doctors' organized campaign against venereal disease, starting in 1902. Chapters 9 and 10 examine the ideas and activities of the sex-reform movement that took organized form in 1904/1905. All five chapters trace a process of evolution and radicalization driven by a whole set of internal conflicts and crises in the years between 1906 and 1910.

Part III examines the broad and escalating confrontation between these various groupings as it developed after about 1908. One development of this period was the emergence of the diffuse but important – and very vocal – new science of sexology (*Sexualwissenschaft*), and its bifurcation into bitterly opposed left and right factions as a consequence of a growing confrontation with sex reform and the women's movements, on the one hand, and moral conservatives, on the other. This is the topic of Chapter 11. Chapter 12 lays out the broader escalating complex of confrontations between these three loose groupings – religious moral conservatives, socialist and democratic sexual radicals, and men committed both to the exclusive authority of science and to masculine privilege.

The conclusion, finally, lays out the key findings of this study and returns to an assessment of the more theoretical questions addressed in this introduction. It elaborates an explanation of the book's findings that is rooted in the social and institutional history analyzed in the body of the book. And it offers some reflections on the deeper structure of Germans' thinking about sex and politics in the period before World War I, and of the ultimate stakes that those involved in the debate over sexual morality thought they were playing for. Ultimately, beneath all the complexity of the debate, it suggests, those involved believed that the "problem" of sexuality posed a stark question: what does it mean to be, or to fail to be, human? The answer to this simple question, it turned out, was not simple; and it got ever less simple over time.

Again, this book tells a very complex story. But it embraces that complexity because we understand the political dynamics of modernity only when we understand the full range of possibilities that modernization created. This book explores one important thing that modernization made possible: the very rapid proliferation of a remarkably diverse set of understandings of what the fact that human beings reproduce sexually means for politics – politics at the level of the state, politics at the level of interpersonal relations, and the internal politics of the self. That proliferation in turn created an intense, escalating, and ramifying set of political conflicts, with its own potentials. In the broadest terms, the conclusion of this book is that the decisive political potential of sexual modernity lies not in the politics of sexuality, in the sense of a particular political tendency or agenda (say, democratic or totalitarian), but in the multiplicity of tendencies and agendas it enabled and in the interactions among them. Perhaps a somewhat convoluted formulation will sum this point up efficiently: what was most important was not the politics of sexuality but the politics of the politics of sexuality.