
Conference Report

Beyond Norms and Categories. Towards a History of Sexual Practices, 1850–1960

Organizer: Veronika Settele / Lisa Hellriegel, Institut für Geschichtswissenschaft, Universität Bremen

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Report by: Alina Potempa / Teresa Schenk, Institut für Geschichtswissenschaften, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

How to write a history of sexual practices? What do concrete practices of pleasure, procreation, contraception, and sexual violence reveal about the organisation of society? To discuss these questions, the junior research group “Sexual Practices between Secularisation and Scientification, 1848–1930” hosted an international conference at the University of Bremen.

The first panel discussed the aspects of race and racism in the context of sexuality. LUCY DEBUS (Sandbostel) presented her research on forbidden sexual relations between Germans and prisoners of war or forced labourers during the Second World War. Debus’ project concentrates on the children born out of these criminalised contacts and the racial discrimination they faced throughout their lives. The precise description of sexual relations in the context of prosecution reveals the strategies used to avoid punishment. This first presentation already emphasised that sources on sexual practices often result from the criminalisation and subsequent prosecution of these acts.

ALEXANDER MAXWELL (Wellington) presented 19th century travelogues written by the German Maximilian Heine and the Scot William Cumming. He showed how “lustful doctors” could discuss their sexual desires openly, albeit in a sophisticated literary style, without losing their “respectability”. The subsequent discussion raised questions of gendered Orientalism in the description of sexuality and sexual desire.

This also led to the aspect of colonialism, which LOONG DIEN MIN (Cambridge) addressed in her paper on (il)legitimate intimacies within British Malaya’s plural legal and normative landscape (1890–1941). She illustrated that colonial law could only influence, but not reorganise the local norms of sexual morality. In terms of colonial intimacies as lived experience, she argued that the idea of “illegitimate” and “unnatural” sexual encounters was subject to negotiations between legal and normative notions of sexual morality.

The second panel approached the conference theme from the perspective of religion and reproduction. JESSICA ALBRECHT (Bonn) presented a history of sex education embedded in the religion and eugenics of the 19th and early 20th centuries. By examining four female educators who worked in the United States and the British Empire, she pointed out how the discourse of eugenics acted as a link

between the field of sexual education and the field of religion. Albrecht also made clear that research on this “entanglement“ needs to take into account its global and imperial context.

PAULINE MORTAS (Paris) impressively demonstrated that physical objects are a promising lens for a history of sexual practices. Her paper examined the material culture of what is sometimes called the “first sexual revolution” (1880s–1930s) in France. Mortas’ research centres on contraceptive devices. Approaching these objects and their intended uses through advertisements, medical books and birth-control brochures, she showed how they were able to transform gender dynamics and disrupt traditional “sexual scripts“.

KATERINA PIRO (Mannheim) and ALINA POTEMPA (Berlin) focused on confessional dynamics in the area of sexuality and reproduction. Piro presented her research on Protestant clergy and their marital relationships in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Public and private writings by clergymen and their wives shed light on attitudes towards sexuality in the context of the vicarage. Piro concluded that sexual practices of the Protestant clergy not only followed religious norms, but also reflected cultural changes of their time such as women's emancipation. The use of contraceptive methods did not necessarily differ from non-religious couples.

Potempa in turn referred to Catholicism and its debates about the (im)morality of contraceptive practices in the first half of the 20th century. Drawing on discussions in pastoral medicine of the late 19th century up to its papal authorisation in the 1950s, she presented the “catholic story” of the rhythm method. Due to its unreliability, it was also known as playing “Vatican Roulette”. Potempa emphasised the ruptures and ambivalences of this story – oscillating between the church’s exercise of power over the faithful and their self-empowerment in questions of practical sexuality and contraception.

VERONIKA SETTELE (Bremen) concluded the panel with a paper that stressed the continuing relevance of religion for the social sphere of sexuality, even after the “secularisation” of marriage and education. In three case studies, Settele examined the growth of religious women’s associations, the critique of church morality in catholic autobiographies, and the efforts of protestant organisations to influence the practice of midwifery. The ongoing discussion of religious issues in the field of reproduction and sexuality throughout the 20th century demonstrates the need for research moving beyond the analytic dichotomy of religion and secular society.

LISA HELLRIEGEL (Bremen) opened the panel on sexual violence and law. Her paper presented court cases dealing with “Notzucht” (rape) in Hamburg in the 1920s and 1930s. While the sources centre on sexual violence, they also offer a glimpse into the everyday lives of young, mostly working-class men and women. As Hellriegel highlighted, notions of consent and violence must be historicised. It is therefore necessary to focus on concrete sexual practices in order to understand what made and unmade consent in the eyes of the law.

CHIFUNDO KAMBA (Stellenbosch) showcased how sexual violence was dealt with in the dual regulatory system of early colonial Malawi. Kamba argued that despite efforts to curb sexual violence by colonial agents as well as African elites, both the British and African legal system proved inadequate to provide justice for victims of sexual violence. Colonial administrators dismissed cases in pursuit of imperial interests, while local men sought control and possession over women's bodies. Persistent consequences of this colonial-era legal pluralism make investigations into the historical complexities and concrete regulatory practices – such as those described by Kamba and Dien Min – all the more important.

SABINA MOMPÓ (Barcelona) emphasised the interdependence of “sexed” violence, female oppression, and moral judgement in Francoist Spain. The medical examinations carried out during legal investigations addressed both the physical and moral “integrity” of female rape victims. Strategies of delegitimation put forward during the trials reveal a striking pattern. The victim's sexual history and the potential loss of “sexual honour” served as a measure of credibility, especially for women. The three presentations given by Hellriegel, Kamba, and Mompó powerfully illustrated that notions of gender and race influenced how (sexual) violence was exercised, how judgements were made, and what punishments were deemed appropriate within a particular social context.

The final panel examined how societies dealt with sexual practices that were perceived as contrary to their norms. Applying the stigma theory of E. Goffman, PAUL DURAND (Paris) distinguished between two types of social interaction among homosexual men in the French city of Angers. While the homosexual “bomb” (party) was characterised by expressions of cultural markers of deviant homosexual identity (such as cross-dressing), the second type – public intimacy – describes an anonymous, exclusively sexual act. Durand thus raised the question of how to differentiate between “sexual identity” and “sexual practices”.

JENS ELBERFELD (Halle) presented the remarkable diaries of young female reformatory inmates. The writings were published in 1933 as part of a psychological study on “verwahrloste” (neglected) girls from non-bourgeois backgrounds. These young women were surprisingly open about their own sexual desires. As was pointed out during the discussion, the reliability of autobiographical sources and the context of their publication must always be evaluated with caution. Nevertheless, Elberfeld argued convincingly for the promising potential of the individual practices described in these diaries to complement or contrast scientific and moral discourses on adolescent sexuality.

German and British boarding schools served as important “schools of masculinity” during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this homosocial space, masturbation was a frequently addressed concern. DANIEL GERSTER (Hamburg) skilfully demonstrated how research can be expanded beyond scientific and public debates on onanism in order to shed light on masturbation as a social practice. Punishment books, diaries, and letters documented students' (mis-)behaviour as well as elaborate practices of prevention such as removed toilet doors and sowed-up pockets.

The international conference successfully brought together multiple perspectives on the history of sexual practices. Three overarching aspects were particularly noteworthy:

1. Circulation: How did people learn about sexual practices? This fascinating yet challenging historiographical question requires research into different media and their respective audiences. For example, practical information about contraception may have been transmitted through midwives, via guidebooks and advertisements. The dissemination of knowledge does not happen in a linear fashion, but circulates between individuals and social groups. It is subject to appropriation and reinterpretation.

2. Power: Throughout the conference, the importance of an intersectional research perspective was emphasised. Sexual practices cannot be studied without reference to gendered expectations, racial discrimination, and markers of class distinction. “Transgressive” practices did not exist outside of discursive norms and categories. Individual agency could only be negotiated in confrontation with historically specific power dynamics and structures of social inequality. Power relations are not only inscribed in the source material, they have created the sources historians work with. What we know today about historical sexual practices is often based on efforts to prevent and criminalise sexual deviance.

3. Sources: The question of source material is one of the most important issues in writing a history of sexual practices. Sexuality is a sensitive subject, embedded in cultural and religious taboos and often only implicitly addressed. The conference clearly showed the importance of consulting a wide range of sources – not only textual ones – in order to approach sexual practices through the discourses that surround and shape them.

All these aspects, which could only be touched upon in a two-day conference, deserve further research. The conference title called for a shift in the relationship between norms, categories, and practices in the history of sexuality – in favour of the latter. But do historians ever get beyond norms and categories? How exactly do norms and categories influence concrete sexual practices and vice versa? The international panel contributions have provided many thought-provoking impulses. A longer concluding session would have rounded out the conference. Yet it is precisely these unanswered questions that have laid the foundation for future events and further discussions on the topic.

Conference Overview:

Welcome: Veronika Settele (Bremen) / Lisa Hellriegel (Bremen)

Panel 1: Race, Racism and Sexuality

Chair: Norman Aselmeyer (Bremen)

Lucy Debus (Sandbostel): Forbidden Relationships between Germans and Prisoners of War or Forced Labourers during the Second World War

Alexander Maxwell (Wellington): Lustful Doctors in the Orient. Foreign Women and Sexual Respectability in the 1820s and 1830s

Loong Dien Min (Cambridge): Beyond the Law of ‘Unnatural Offences’. Uncovering Experiences of (Il)legitimate Intimacies in British Malaya’s Plural Legal and Normative Landscape (1890–1941)

Panel 2: Religion and Reproduction

Chair: Cornelius Torp (Bremen)

Jessica Albrecht (Bonn): Religion, Sexual Education and Eugenics

Pauline Mortas (Paris): Writing the History of Sexualities Through Objects? What Contraceptive Devices Can Teach Us About Sexual Practices and Sensibilities (France, 1880s–1930s)

Katerina Piro (Mannheim): Reproduction and Sexuality and the Ambivalent Protestant Clerics in Germany around 1900

Alina Potempa (Berlin): Playing “Vatican Roulette” – Catholicism and Contraception after 1930

Veronika Settele (Bremen): Secularizing Pleasure and Reproduction among Church Personnel and Lay People in Germany, after 1900

Panel 3: Sexual Violence and Law

Chair: Julia Reus (Bayreuth)

Lisa Hellriegel (Bremen): Between Consent and Violence. What Court Files Tell Us About Sexual Practices in German Cities, c. 1900–1935

Chifundo Kamba (Stellenbosch): ‘No Room for Abuse?’: Colonial Agents and African Elites Efforts to Curb Sexual Violence in Early Colonial Malawi, c. 1891–1920

Sabina Mompó (Barcelona): Rape in Franco’s Spain through Medical Reports and Legal Proceedings. Sexed Violence and Moral-Catholic Judgment

Panel 4: Deviance and Control

Chair: Andrea Rottmann (Berlin)

Paul Durand (Paris): Exploring the Boundaries of Intimacy and Sexuality. Gender as a Tool for Homosexual Encounters and Police Arrests in Public Toilets between the Two World Wars in Angers

Jens Elberfeld (Halle): “Liederlich, raffiniert und mannstoll”. Welfare Education and Adolescent Sexuality in Early 20th Century Germany

Daniel Gerster (Hamburg): “We Found Individual Relief in Masturbation.” Towards a Cultural History of Onanism

Citation

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