

# (Yet) Another History of Sexual Science

Ralph M. Leck, *Vita Sexualis:  
Karl Ulrichs and the Origins of Sexual Science*  
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Foucault has cast a long shadow over the scholarship on sexual science. For decades, scholars have been trying to interpret and have been misinterpreting his famous sentence, “[t]he sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43) to vindicate their arguments about the nineteenth-century history of sexuality. More and more monographs are being published on the subject and authors are still tempted to painstakingly tiptoe around Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1976) despite the fact that, more often than not, they need to address Foucault’s historical inaccuracies. A lacuna in his work was that the German lawyer and gay rights activist, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895), “the first theorist of homosexuality,” as Hubert Kennedy put it, did not find his way into the book. To remedy the gross neglect in *The History of Sexuality*, articles by Manfred Herzer and books such as *Ulrichs* (1988) by Kennedy, *Karl Heinrichs zu Ehren* (2000) by Wolfram Setz, and *Karl Heinrich Ulrichs* (2000) and *Geschichte der Sexualwissenschaft* (2009) by Volkmar Sigusch were published. Written in a similar vein and highly critical of Foucault, one of the latest additions to this list is *Vita Sexualis: Karl Ulrichs and the Origins of Sexual Science* by Ralph M. Leck. Drawing on his scholarly predecessors, Leck “highlights Ulrichs’s heroic and often lonely struggle to decriminalise homosexuality, create a more tolerant society, recognise erotic

rights, and establish a more inclusive version of political liberalism” and “interprets Ulrichs as the inventor of a new science of sexual heterogeneity,” claiming that Ulrichs’s “pioneering politics mark him as the first post-Victorian sexual modernist” (xi). Instead of offering a biography of Ulrichs or a concise history of sexuality, the book resorts to presenting “a history of ideas” (xi) in six chapters to discuss *vita sexualis*, the idea that sexology belongs to social ethics and that the public should know about a wide range of sexual variety to initiate a dialogue about the legality and morality of same-sex desire.

Chapter 1, “Motifs in Sexual Science” introduces Ulrichs’s larger context. It outlines the friction between the acceptance of the legitimacy of sexual science and the decline of sexual modernists. Presenting a compelling argument, it also demonstrates how contemporaneous case studies worked both for and against traditional sexologists who were working on pathologising same-sex desire. The chapter ponders whether sexual science was “specialised or public knowledge,” and foreshadows the influence of Ulrichs on British authors the book will later discuss. In the next chapter, “Inventing Sexual Liberalism,” denouncing Foucault and building on Ulrichs and Károly Kertbeny, Leck “investigates sexual modernism as an epochal linguistic revolution” (33). It is demonstrated how Ulrichs’s coinage, *Urning* (uranian in English) and his typology of sexual intermediaries came into being. Ulrichs’s comrade, Kertbeny, who coined the term *Homosexual*, has a pivotal role in this chapter to substantiate how the two fought against pejorative, “traditional” terms for same-sex desire. The following chapter, “The Epistemic Politics of Nature” considers the problem that the theological concept of what counts as “natural” was adopted in science. According to Ulrichs’s argument, same-sex desire is just as natural, considering the “empirical knowledge about variance in history” (69). This argument was greeted by the disapproval of its contemporaries; what is more, Ulrichs, too, found himself in conflict with his own arguments on naturalness. One of the reasons of the break between Ulrichs and Kertbeny might have been the fact that the latter found Ulrichs’s claims concerning naturalness and innateness (the two terms are nondescript in Leck’s study) counterproductive to the legitimisation of same-sex desire.

The fourth chapter, “The Science of Agape” studies possibly the most important historical idea of sexual modernism. The major works of three authors receive critical attention here: Ulrichs, Swiss author Heinrich Hössli (1784–1864), and English poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds (1840–1893). Studying their works, Leck

shows that sexual modernism was not interested in *libido sexualis* and somatic pleasure (Eros) only but added the amatory aspect (Agape) to the study of same-sex desire. Thus, the science of Agape, the scrutiny of “double-love” focused on “the romantic, egalitarian, and intellectual preconditions for sexual attraction” (103). Leck, unlike his scholarly predecessors, is bold enough to consider “The Political Aesthetics of Anal Sex” at length to dissect the problem of the contemporaneous public “association of male homosexuality and anal sex” (121). In the penultimate chapter, “Sexual Degeneration and Bourgeois Culture,” three theorists of degeneration, “one of the most important power-languages of the late nineteenth century” (141), are under scrutiny. After a brief history of degeneration theories, the chapter outlines the ideas of medical doctor Eduard Reich (1836–1919), who believed that masturbation is the cause of degeneration in modern society. Broadening the scope of this principle, he advocated that the surveillance state should control nonreproductive sexualities. Leck then goes on to discuss Austro-German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902), the author of probably the most important canonised text of sexology in the era, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). Krafft-Ebing, pathologising non-heteronormative sexual variants, created a new, classificatory science of abnormalities. Lastly, the degeneration theory of Max Nordau (1849–1923) is analysed. Unlike Reich and Krafft-Ebing, Nordau’s primary focus was not medical science but society and culture. Leck also offers an analysis of Nordau’s drama, *The Right to Love* (1894) to demonstrate how the theorist used literature to fight against “the progressive politics of literary modernism” (142) and sexual modernism in *belles-lettres*. The last chapter of the book, “Normalising the Marquis de Sade” studies the works of German psychiatrist Iwan Bloch (1872–1922), who is considered to be the “Father of Sexual Science” due to his coinage *Sexualwissenschaft*, giving a name to the discipline. Bloch’s interdisciplinary approaches to sexual science were invaluable additions to sexual modernism: historical sexology, anthropological sexology, and feminist sexology. The chapter focuses on Bloch’s historical sexology arguing that “many so-called sexual anomalies were socially produced” (185). To prove this point, he published texts of and studies about the Marquis de Sade.

Concluding the monograph, the afterword explains why Leck’s work is one of the most welcome additions to the study of sexual science. Leck identifies three major issues with Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*: “inability to recognise voices of social resistance,” “Foucault’s chronology is inaccurate,” and “the mean of discursive production was not controlled exclusively by medical tyrants” (222–223).

He also targets *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler, arguing that “a shared indifference to the legacy of the sexual science movement . . . led to an overestimation of Butler’s originality” (221). Leck, as a result, calls for the importance of the groundwork in sexual modernism, implicitly questioning the use of gender and queer theories in the study of nineteenth-century sexology.

*Vita Sexualis* is enriched by Leck’s insights into history, science, gender studies, sociology, philosophy, and anthropology. Yet the book seems rather dull, despite its potential, for two reasons. Firstly, it does not at all appear to be capable of conveying the passion with which Ulrichs discussed the legitimacy of same-sex desire. Secondly, it looks as if Leck were writing two separate books: one on Ulrichs and the other on “the affiliation—dare we say causal connection—between sexual orientation and the emergence of sexual modernism” (129). Although it is evident that the two intertwine, they do not mix organically in Leck’s execution. After a while the monograph becomes exhaustively repetitive in spite of the invaluable points it raises. I might add here that Leck’s double agenda perhaps explains that his use of the word “Victorian” is extremely frustrating in the context of mainly German-speaking thinkers despite his critical foray into terminology: modernist versus traditional sexologists, *vita sexualis* versus *psychopathia sexualis*. Even more frustrating is how opinionated Leck is throughout the book, although his research suggests superficially presented or even false ideas. It is not the present review’s aim to set the record straight item by item; nevertheless, in what follows, I would like to discuss three instances briefly.

Concerning “the draft constitution of the Urning League” (56) by Ulrichs, Leck finds it ironic that Ulrichs sent the draft to Kertbeny, who, according to Leck, was heterosexual. The irony lies in “that the proposed composition . . . would have excluded Kertbeny’s participation” (57). Leck backs his argument with a quote: “Kertbeny was ‘one of the many nonhomosexual men who played important roles in all phases of the struggle to liberate homosexuals’” (56–57). Having checked the notes, I found that the quote did not come from Ulrichs but a German author and LGBT activist, Manfred Herzer, whose works are often cited when it comes to Kertbeny. The steadfast belief in Kertbeny’s heterosexuality usually has its origins in the pamphlet in which “homosexual” as a new coinage was used for the first time in public, as Kertbeny referred to himself as “normally sexed.” However, Kertbeny’s writings beg the question how he found homosexuals and why these men trusted him with their “unnatural” and “criminal” secret. An internationally

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recognised article, “The Double Life of Kertbeny” (2004) might have the answer to this problem, in which Judit Takács reports her invaluable find in Kertbeny’s diaries—suggesting self-censorship concerning male names, whom Kertbeny knew intimately. The fact that Leck does not have a shadow of a doubt about the matter and his gross neglect that he did not consult Takács’s article result in a malcontent and misinformed reader.

The book is not free of logical fallacies either. Regarding the ban on the first book-length sexological study by an English physician, Havelock Ellis’s *Sexual Inversion* (1897), Leck argues as follows:

In 1898, Ellis and his publisher were indicted in *Regina v. Bedborough* for the sale of “a certain lewd wicked bawdy scandalous libel in the form of a book.” As witnessed in the press coverage of the 1895 trial of Oscar Wilde, the journalistic temper of the era was censorial and sensationalist. Press coverage of the Ellis case was similarly characterised by condemnation and vilification. Articles in London’s *Daily Chronicle* characterised *Sexual Inversion* as filthy and morbid. Unlike Wilde, Ellis escaped prosecution, but the fear of legal trouble led him to publish future volumes of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* outside the United Kingdom. (128)

It is baffling that Leck calls the publisher’s trial “the Ellis case.” Ellis was not charged. Moreover, although the court and the public had their opinion of the book, the publisher was prosecuted for the volume’s distribution and not for its content (see British landmark case *Regina v. Hicklin* in 1868). It is also inexplicable that Leck compares the Bedborough case to Wilde’s *trials* (intentionally in the plural). Let us not forget that Wilde’s case had nothing to do with censorship. Although his works came up during the trials, he was prosecuted under the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act for gross indecency.

My last comment is concerned with Leck’s conclusion about Krafft-Ebing and degeneration theory: “Krafft-Ebing’s *psychopathia sexualis* confirmed the mores of his bourgeois milieu, and his deployment of degenerative theory drowned out the early flowerings of sexual modernism found in the works of Ulrichs” (162). Krafft-Ebing received numerous unsolicited case studies through the years he was working on the new editions of *Psychopathia Sexualis*. It would be a Foucauldian fallacy

to argue that these subjects were simply passive sufferers of Krafft-Ebing's medical science. Most probably it was the result of the additional case studies that led to Krafft-Ebing recanting his conclusion about the connection between homosexuality and degeneration in the 1901 volume of *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (Yearbook of Intermediate Sexual Types)—the English edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* in the same year was not updated accordingly.

Alluding to *The History of Sexuality*, I cannot help but call the book *yet* another history of sexual science. Leck's intelligible critique of Foucault is ironic in terms of his monograph's depth and historical accuracy. Nevertheless, Leck's interpretive stance is more than admirable. Attributing paramount importance to Ulrichs, *Vita Sexualis: Karl Ulrichs and the Origins of Sexual Science* is an indispensable attempt at writing a new history of sexual science. Leck, following his critical sensitivity, offers an imperious introduction to the mechanism and birth of sexual modernism in the shadow of Foucault.

#### WORKS CITED

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