



Homosexuality

by Matthew D. Johnson

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Karl Maria Kertbeny
(1824-1882) coined the
term "homosexuality" in
1869.

Homosexuality and heterosexuality emerged as concepts in late nineteenth-century European medical and juridical discourse. Their introduction and popularization occasioned a revolution in the way sexual behavior was understood by linking that behavior inextricably to social identity, hastening cultural changes in the organization of sexuality already underway in urban areas of Europe and North America.

Homosexuality became conceptually inseparable from heterosexuality; each term required interpretation in terms of the other, and by the mid-twentieth century the sexual world could be quite easily imagined as being comprised of two distinct polities by scientist and layperson alike. The considerable multidisciplinary social scientific enterprise deployed in the investigation of the "homosexual problem," however, repeatedly arrived at the conclusion that this binary division was not a natural or inevitable one, and that human sexual organization was much more complex than the homosexual/heterosexual model was prepared to admit.

Such conclusions have proven problematic both for champions of homosexual rights and for those who agitate against homosexuality, in that they have both been deprived of a clear object around which to organize their efforts. Yet these findings also suggest new ways of conceiving of human sexuality and new strategies for securing rights of sexual expression as basic rights for all people.

Genesis and Development of a Concept

The word "homosexual" first appeared in German in an 1869 political pamphlet by Karl Maria Kertbeny (the pseudonym of Karl Benkert) intended to protest the inclusion of Prussian sodomy statutes (the legal antecedents of the infamous Nazi Paragraph 175) in the constitution of a unified German state.

The term, as contemporary scholars have indicated, was a clumsy neologism combining elements of both Latin and Greek, as did other nineteenth-century European medical nomenclature. Nonetheless, the word proved resilient and was quickly taken up and popularized both by other pamphleteers and by practitioners of forensic medicine who were developing the new discipline of sexology; it appeared for the first time in English in 1892.

The emergence of the term "homosexual" roughly coincided with these authorities' discovery of highly elaborated social networks of male persons in some European and North American cities. These men were typically understood to be effeminate in their appearance and demeanor, desiring and soliciting sexual contact exclusively with members of their own sex. By the close of the nineteenth century, these men had come to be known to jurists and medical practitioners as "homosexuals."

This coincidence begs the chicken-and-egg question that has preoccupied historians of homosexuality for decades: did "homosexual" people exist prior to the development of a concept of homosexual identity, or were the jurists and physicians who coined the term responsible for fashioning that identity? The answer

appears to be both.

Clearly, the historical record demonstrates that the behavior patterns of men who sought sex with men in Western Europe were already changing independent of any state or medical intervention, beginning in urban Britain perhaps as early as the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Yet as these (usually middle-class) men became aware and frequently embraced the concept of a homosexual identity, typically encountered through readings of juridical and medical texts on the subject, the shift in male-male sexual interaction already underway was further compounded.

By giving such behavior patterns a name and inextricably relating those patterns to the individual human subjects engaged in them through their writings, sexologists and jurists added gravity to the apparent social changes taking place in the urban environment around them.

Perhaps paradoxically, these texts frequently provided the subjects of their analysis a platform from which to testify about their own experiences, as well as providing readers with a point of reference to understand, interpret, and even augment their own erotic inclinations and sexual careers, many going so far as to identify locales for meeting sexual prospects. The social phenomena identified by these texts were perpetuated and further elaborated through their consumption by an ostensibly "homosexual" readership.

Homosexuality was an elastic concept; its elasticity and indeterminacy were precisely what lent it such rhetorical force, for homosexuals and their advocates as well as their detractors. The original range of scientific terms denoting male-male eroticism--"contrary sexual feeling," "uranianism," "sexual inversion," as well as "homosexuality"--gradually lost their definitional specificity. By the early twentieth century, "homosexuality" might be used interchangeably with any of this competing terminology. By the mid-twentieth century, other terms had largely disappeared from both the scientific and the popular lexicon.

This terminological consolidation reflected a growing consensus about what constituted homosexuality: namely, the simultaneous incidence of same-sex eroticism and gender role non-conformity. Homosexuality increasingly began to be understood as standing in opposition to "heterosexuality," a term that had originally signified a voracious and pathological desire for sexual contact with both sexes but which over time had come to mean what was regarded as the highly normative desire for sexual contact exclusively with members of the opposite sex.

Experts also began to juxtapose "true" homosexuality with "cultivated pederasty." The latter was attributed to temporal or situational constraints, most typically the absence of women from the social environment (hence its attribution to prisoners, military conscripts, schoolchildren, and clergy, but also to prostitutes), as well as to so-called perverts, typically men with an insatiable desire to cultivate new perversions as others became less gratifying.

"Pederasty" was seen by sexologists as a form of behavior requiring correction or criminal sanction, precisely because it was believed to be voluntary. "True" or "congenital" homosexuals, on the other hand, were understood to manifest the same behaviors involuntarily. This variety of homosexuality was believed to be innate, deeply embedded in the constitution of the individual, and therefore not criminal.

The scholars who did the most to amplify this position were doubtless the jurist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who theorized that "uranians" were female souls in male bodies, and the physician Magnus Hirschfeld, whose comparative anatomical studies identified both male and female homosexuals as "sexual intermediaries" along a continuum from male to female.

Such theories that linked male homosexuality to femininity were directly challenged by a small number of Hirschfeld's homosexual contemporaries (the *Gemeinschaft der Eigenen*, or the "community of the special"), who were inspired by classical Greek ethical writings in their claim that male-male eroticism was the province of the social elite and therefore more, not less, masculine.

Hirschfeld's copious writings and international lecture tours, however, convinced a great many of the correctness of his theories, as did comparable English-language work by his colleague Havelock Ellis. The original belief in constitutional immutability, however, did not stop later generations of researchers (notably doctors in Nazi concentration camps) from attempting surgical "cures" and hormone therapy on homosexual prisoners in order to correct their "defect."

As the definition of male homosexuality congealed, an analogous condition for women began to be imagined, grounded once again in the principles of same-sex eroticism and gender role non-conformity. Once again, there was an apparent synergy between discourses on female homosexuality and emergent same-sex erotic practices among women.

Medical and juridical attention continued to be paid mostly to men, however, primarily because the laws against same-sex sexual behavior that reformers wished to overturn targeted men almost exclusively. The fact that many of the reformers (notably Ulrichs and Hirschfeld) were themselves homosexual men, as well as the prevailing belief that women were by their nature asexual beings who could not initiate erotic contact with one another further fueled this bias.

Homosexuality and Its Discontents: Emancipation, Essentialism, Constructionism

No sooner had homosexuality been conceptualized than homosexual emancipation had begun. The earliest extant texts on the topic were political tracts protesting European sodomy laws. The relationship between jurists and physicians was an extremely productive one; some doctors (such as Hirschfeld) themselves became champions of the jurists' (including Ulrichs) cause. Agitators for homosexual rights, in their turn, could not operate independently of medico-scientific personages or the concepts that they promulgated.

It was only with the advent of gay and lesbian liberation in the 1960s and 1970s that the rejection of scientific explanatory models for homosexual behavior and homosexual identity came to characterize the movement for homosexual emancipation. Yet the displacement of "homosexual" by "gay and lesbian," as gay liberation advocated, did not ultimately challenge prevailing medical assumptions regarding homosexuality. Challenging those assumptions required challenging the late nineteenth-century European medical concept of homosexuality itself.

As historians of homosexuality in the 1970s worked to uncover more evidence about the lives of "gay" people in the past, they ran up against a formidable obstacle: namely, the apparent absence of the concept of "homosexuality" or an analogous concept prior to the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe. Anthropologists were also confronted with the fact of "homosexuality's" geographic specificity; no precisely corresponding term could be identified outside of Western Europe and areas of heavy European settlement.

Prior to the late nineteenth century in Europe, same-sex sexual interaction seems to have been understood as episodic and strictly behavioral, a sin or a crime to be punished by the appropriate religious or secular authorities. Just as sin did not inhere in some individuals more than in others, sodomy (along with other sexual delicts such as masturbation, fornication, seduction, and rape) was a vice to which anyone could fall prey.

More recently, anthropologists' studies have shed light on societies in which same-sex erotic contacts were regarded with varying degrees of social tolerance or opprobrium, but which in any case did not perceive same-sex and different-sex sexual interaction as constitutionally opposed or as inhering in persons comprising two mutually exclusive social groups.

The relative propriety of same-sex sexual encounters in non-European societies was frequently determined by context; such encounters might be sanctioned for purposes of initiation rites between men and boys (as was the case in parts of New Guinea as recently as the 1970s, and as was arguably also true of classical

Greece) or when one of the interactants had adopted an alternative gender role (as was the case in some Pueblo societies of western North America well into the twentieth century, as well as is currently true in many other parts of the world), but not otherwise.

Scholars of this period, inspired by the radical politics of the time, were faced with a difficult choice when confronted with this impasse and others: concepts such as "race," "gender," and "childhood" were similarly absent from pre-nineteenth-century historical sources and could likewise be shown to be relatively recent developments.

To argue that "homosexuality" as such did not exist prior to the word's entrance into language in 1869 and that it was specifically a European invention effectively denied contemporary gays and lesbians a link to a past believed to be their birthright, silencing voices from European pre-modernity (as well as silencing non-European voices altogether) who had engaged in some kind of erotic relation with persons of their own sex, even if that relationship could not be readily translated into the terms of contemporary Euro-American societies.

But to suggest that the link between contemporary gays and lesbians and their past was direct, transparent, and unmediated by the particularities of historical and cultural context was highly misleading and, indeed, ran contrary to the available evidence--would it be right to ground this claim to a patrimony on a fiction?

The first argument represented what came to be known as an *essentialist* position: namely, "homosexuality" is a phenomenon that is pre-social and inheres in a small fraction of individuals who are equally distributed throughout all history and all cultures, and therefore all apparently "homosexual" conduct is related.

The second argument embodies the *social constructionist* position, which argues that just as "homosexuality" is bound to a specific time and culture, other expressions of same-sex eroticism must be similarly bound to their respective social contexts and can be extrapolated from these contexts for comparative purposes only with great care.

The division between "essentialists" and "social constructionists" came to characterize a whole generation of scholarship in lesbian and gay studies, yet from the inception of the debate the boundary between the two camps was an obscure one.

As the late John Boswell (himself frequently accused of being the essentialist *par excellence*) once remarked, no historians or social scientists were willing to explicitly identify themselves with the essentialist position, for fear of being regarded as unscholarly; "essentialism" was less a theoretical standpoint that required advocacy than it was a negative definition of what social constructionist scholars believed themselves to be doing--shaking foundational assumptions about the nature of "homosexuality" on which the claims of both gay liberation and its opponents rested.

Radical social constructionists, labeled "New Inventionists" by Joseph Cady, were themselves subject to critique for the unsupportable assumption that has guided their analysis that social identities grounded in sexual behavior are strictly a modern European phenomenon.

This categorical assumption has had the problematic (if unintended) consequence of trapping individuals in the past within present-day hegemonic ideologies, denying them both self-awareness and agency as subjects. There is considerable historical evidence from literature and diaries that at least some pre-modern European men and women who engaged in same-sex sexual activities had a distinct awareness of their "difference" and may indeed have developed sexual identities based on such a difference, even though those identities may have not been congruent with contemporary homosexual identities.

However, if anyone can be said to have "won" the largely spurious debate between essentialism and social

constructionism, it is the social constructionists, at least to the extent that there is now virtual scholarly unanimity that sexual categories are always historically and culturally specific rather than universal and invariant.

Yet this scholarly victory has come at a cost to gay and lesbian minority group politics. Emphasizing the cultural specificity and peculiar nature of "homosexuality" as we know it has made connections to apparently related phenomena in the past and in other societies more tenuous and more remote. It has helped heighten awareness of pluralism within an ostensibly monolithic global "gay and lesbian community," but has thus also helped undermine political solidarity in the name of that community.

Social constructionist scholars have responded to this dilemma by producing elaborately reasoned classificatory systems to describe the conceptual relation between different manifestations of same-sex eroticism over time and across cultures.

These masterful schemes have three significant drawbacks, however: one, they are based almost entirely on data regarding male-male eroticism--women have not been introduced into these taxonomies, nor have separate ones been developed for them; two, they have the function of effacing important differences in same-sex erotic expression within societies (particularly along the lines of class, racial, and gender identities), reducing the social complexity of sexuality to a single uniform mode of expression; and three, they unduly privilege "homosexuality"--a modern, European concept--as the yardstick by which other same-sex erotic practices are measured, even suggesting an evolutionary trajectory from behavior patterns manifest in pre-modern and non-European societies to our current hegemonic modality, alongside which other sexual behavior patterns nonetheless persist.

Moreover, the explanatory power of such taxonomies remains limited so long as no coherent etiological model for same-sex erotic inclination is available.

Is It Just a phase? Homosexuality, Social Science, and Queer Theory

Social scientific inquiry into homosexuality in the mid-twentieth-century United States marked a turning point in the way in which homosexuality was conceived. Alfred Kinsey's and his associates' extensive survey data, published in the monumental volumes *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), challenged the idea that all individuals could be neatly sorted out according to the terms of a heterosexual/homosexual binary.

A large percentage of Kinsey's respondents evinced sexual response to both men and women over their lifetimes. In this light, neither "homosexuality" nor "heterosexuality" appeared to be either permanent or mutually exclusive behavior patterns or states of being, and were thus called into serious question as accurate descriptors of human sexual behavior. To correct this apparent deficiency in available sexual categories, Kinsey introduced his famous seven-point scale, a continuum ranging from "completely heterosexual" (zero) to "completely homosexual" (six), with the vast majority of his subjects falling somewhere in the middle.

Other social scientists who were contemporaries of Kinsey provided ethnographic accounts of persons who engaged in "homosexual" behavior but did not identify as "homosexual," including Albert Reiss's 1961 study of teenage male prostitutes in Nashville and Laud Humphreys's 1970 study of men in St. Louis, many of them married, who frequented public toilets for sex with other men.

More recent research by psychologists indicates that not only sexual *behavior* but also sexual *identity* may be transitional over the lifespan; a person who initially identifies as heterosexual may subsequently identify as bisexual, gay or lesbian, or transgender.

Such findings not only fly in the face of earlier medico-scientific beliefs but also in the face of gay and

lesbian minority group politics, precisely because they destabilize that political movement's constituency. For this reason, gay and lesbian social networks and organizations have been (and often continue to be) wary of admitting a growing number of openly self-identified bisexual, transgender, questioning, and even closeted persons to their ranks.

HIV/AIDS prevention and education initiatives have been similarly bedeviled by the lack of well-bounded at-risk populations. Many men who have sex with men are not gay- or bisexually-identified, and cannot be targeted via the same methods used to reach these groups.

The notion that homosexuality (or, for that matter, heterosexuality) may be a transitional phase at least for some once again raises the specter of a "cure" for homosexuality, not to speak of the categorical dismissal of such assertions or behavior on the part of young people. It also conjures up the image of homosexuals as predators, capable and even bent on seeking out and poisoning, perverting, or converting others, especially the young.

This latter was a potential implication (based, albeit, on a cursory examination) of Kinsey's data that the United States government was not slow to appreciate in instituting its bans on the employment of homosexuals in the military and federal civil service in the 1940s and 1950s as part of "sexual psychopath" legislation.

Nor has the subsequent erasure of "homosexuality" from the lexicon of psychopathology necessarily guaranteed an end to the stigmatization of homosexually identified practices. The removal of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1974 was a major achievement for gay activists. Yet by the early 1980s the newly identified "gender identity disorder," which understood effeminate behavior in young males as pathological and subject to therapeutic intervention, had been codified in the DSM. Gender role non-conformity thus remains a medical "problem," even if same-sex eroticism no longer is one.

Contemporary scholars have further argued that homosexuality was "remedicalized" in the 1980s and 1990s, notably in the search for "gay genes" and "gay brains" to demonstrate the efficacy of nineteenth-century models of homosexual etiology, as well as in research on HIV/AIDS, which focused on gay men and others as "risk groups" rather than identifying and educating all people about "risk behaviors" that could be pathways for the transmission of disease.

The limitations of the homosexual/heterosexual model have thus been laid bare by both social scientific and historical studies as well as by changing socio-historical circumstances. Contemporary scholars have drawn on such data to develop the nascent conceptual framework known as queer theory, which explicitly rejects the binary model in favor of spectral models of both gender and sexuality.

Homosexuality emerged within highly specific historical and cultural constraints; queer theorists argue that as those constraints are transcended or made obsolete, so may the concept of a binary division of human sexual labor. A few have been quick to prophesy the end of "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" as such. Yet given the depth and extent of the personal investment on the part of many in this categorical binary--not to mention the political advancements made by the gay and lesbian movement--homosexuality will likely be with us for a long time to come.

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About the Author

Matthew D. Johnson holds a Masters Degree in Anthropology and History from the University of Michigan.

He is currently Cataloging Assistant in the Brooklyn Museum library.