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The Golden Age of Sexology in Germany: Activism, Institutionalization and the Anthropological Turn

1. ‘Per scientiam ad justiciam’: Magnus Hirschfeld and the Zwischenstufentheorie

In the final years of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries, Germany saw the establishment of numerous scientific committees, the dissemination of journals and almanacs and the compilation of handbooks, all of which were concerned with the propagation of sexological knowledge, sexual hygiene, women’s rights and legal reform.¹ German sexology entered into a more collaborative and institutionalized phase, which was brought to an abrupt halt when the Nazis came to power in 1933, forcing many of the predominantly German-Jewish sexologists into exile. Amongst the growing number of German-speaking sexologists active during the Wilhelminian era and the Weimar Republic, Magnus
Hirschfeld (1868–1935), Albert Moll (1862–1939) and Iwan Bloch (1872–1922) – all of Jewish origins and based in Berlin – were the most prominent and internationally most influential, each putting his distinctive mark on the field. Hirschfeld is most famous for his scientific brand of political activism and his Zwischenstufentheorie (theory of intermediate sexual stages), whilst Moll introduced the terms ‘detumescence’ and the Kontrektationstrieb (contractation drive) into the discourse, unlinking sexuality and procreation by differentiating between a discharge and a relationship drive. Bloch, finally, adopted a culturally comparative, anthropological-ethnological view, challenging the well-established belief that the perversions are a distinctly modern phenomenon.

Hirschfeld’s dictum ‘per scientiam ad justiciam’ neatly encapsulates one of the key motivations for his sexological activities – the compilation of objective, rational and scientifically valid arguments for legislative reform. In 1897, he founded the first homosexual rights organization, the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäre Komitee (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee). He petitioned tirelessly for the abolition of §175, Germany’s anti-homosexuality decree, and mobilized the support of numerous politicians, artists, writers and scientists during his campaign. Hirschfeld calls the paragraph a ‘black stain on the shield of German Justice [Justizial]’, and predicts that she will one day be as ashamed of it as of the witchcraft trials and the persecution of heretics in the Middle Ages, when she ‘was in a very similar manner in direct contradiction with the findings of natural science’.2 He founded the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute