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Introduction

Towards a History of Sexual Science

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Modernity brought with it a new type of regime of power over sex, namely *Scientia Sexualis*, as Foucault elaborated it in his *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (Foucault 1994). This science took its initial shape at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century through the ambitious undertaking of doctors such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis and Magnus Hirschfeld, who set out to analyze what they believed to be the natural laws of sex. Based on the prestige of biological science. Those scientists founded their thinking on the idea that there was a “sexual instinct” that influenced the diversity of individual experiences. According to that rationality, this “sexual instinct” is considered to be a natural process, but one that can suffer deviations. Understanding the mechanism, the natural law and its anomalies would provide a more enlightened view of some of the challenges faced in the contemporary world, in which sexuality plays a fundamental role. The science of sex, then, tries to address the contradictions between order and chaos, desire and repression, freedom and submission, which also occur in sexual behavior.

Those scientists perspectives were not homogeneous, even though they were attuned to the same racist and eugenic scientific paradigm characteristic of the disciplinary society, the ways they approached human sexuality were different in methods and objectives. The works of Krafft-Ebing and Hirschfeld are revealing in that respect. On the one hand, Krafft-Ebing's seminal work *Psychopathia Sexualis* consists of a study of the classification of so-called perversions. Based on biological and psychological factors, the sexologist created a vast taxonomy of sexual behaviors and practices, emphasizing their deviations, perversions and pathologies (Krafft-Ebing 1894). His theses proved to be influential not only in medical circles but also in the legal world. On the other hand, Hirschfeld's research, based on extensive clinical research but also drawing on an anthropological perspective, produced a scientific literature interested in shedding light on social prejudices about human sexuality (Mancini, 2010). Hirschfeld's research concluded that homosexuality was not a pathology, but a normal variation of the dominant heterosexual behavior (Hirschfeld 2013). His scientific output was also intended to shed light on the politics of ignorance regarding homosexuals. In that context, he played an important militant role in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century, creating the humanitarian committee that collected signatures from various eminent figures to pressure the German parliament to repeal paragraph 175, which criminalized sodomy (Dose 2014). While it was active, his grandiose Sexual Institute, founded in 1919 and destroyed by the Nazis in 1933, was a world

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reference in sexuality studies as well as being a place of sociability for homosexuals, transvestites and transsexuals.

Influenced by those works, but also in opposition to them, Sigmund Freud contributed to a broader understanding of sexuality as a founding element of human subjectivity, while at the same time revolutionizing the techniques for treating diseases linked to “sexual pathologies”. In Freud, *Scientia Sexualis* is investigated within medical rationality, but also philosophically. The unconscious, infantile sexuality, the Oedipus complex and the treatment of neuroses through language revolutionized thinking about the functioning of the human psyche and founded an epistemological tradition of its own. As in Hirschfeld, Freud's science has a dual mechanism of regulation, but it also seeks to liberate a part of sexuality perceived as deviant and to alleviate the patient's psychic suffering. This more nuanced view of the incipient *Scientia Sexualis* at the beginning of the twentieth century is somewhat critical of Foucault's view, which analyzes this science as disciplinary.

Until the 1970s, historiographical production on sexuality was timid, but in recent years there has been a vertiginous increase in production. Michel Foucault's thesis in *The History of Sexuality* has contributed greatly to awakening the interest of historians. According to the French philosopher, sexuality is a device, a mechanism for regulating and governing bodies, which operates in contemporary disciplinary society. The change in understanding Foucault proposed drew the attention of historians who began to take an interest in the power relations that constitute this device. That thesis gave particular impetus to feminist studies on gender and sexuality, which are both heirs and critics of Foucault. In the field of the history of science, the subject of the special dossier in this issue of *Transversal*, sexuality has been the subject of now classic works such as the books *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* by Thomas Laqueur and *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* by Anne Fausto-Sterling.

There are a number of factors contributing to the growing interest in *Scientia Sexualis*: the understanding of the importance of sexuality as a component of public health following the HIV/AIDS epidemic; the institutionalization of feminist and gender studies with the creation of studies laboratories in universities around the world; the development of so-called gay and lesbian studies and, not least, the strength of social movements for women's rights and sexual dissidence. This scenario is part of a new epistemological and social battleground: sexuality is now a central issue in political debates in many national contexts. Sex education in schools, reproductive rights for women and homosexual couples, and social rights for transgender people are all widely debated issues and reasons for divisions in the population. This disagreement over sexuality unfolds, and is fed by the political agendas of electoral politics.

All of this, together with an openness on the part of historians to new objects and new perspectives, has contributed to the history of sexuality's having reached the mainstream of contemporary historiography. Our particular interest in this dossier is to shed light on the historical aspects of the formation of *Scientia Sexualis*, its construction and deconstruction, contributions and criticisms, which have marked the history of this science from its birth in the 19th century to the present day. In that sense, I agree with Hirschfeld's proposition that science can, and should enlighten public opinion about myths and untruths regarding sexuality. I would add that a study of the history of sexuality and the philosophical themes that tension contemporary thinking on this subject can also contribute to a more enlightened public debate. I wish you all a good reading of the Special Issue *Scientia Sexualis* and *Historiography of Sexuality*.

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