

Scandal & Science – The Power of Sexology in the Eulenburg Affair, 1906-1909

“The German scandal”

The Eulenburg affair of 1906-1909, Wilhelmine Germany’s biggest domestic scandal before the First World War, has never been looked at as the transnational media event it actually was. An increasingly global public took an interest in ‘the German scandal’ on a scale comparable only to the worldwide debates following on the heels of the French Dreyfus Affair.

The Morocco crisis of 1905-1906 led Maximilian Harden, then Germany’s most controversial journalist, to begin a massive press campaign against the ‘degenerated homosexual *Camarilla*’ which he alleged encircled the German emperor, William II. Harden accused this ‘peace party’ and its head, Prince Philipp Eulenburg, of provoking a moral and political decline of the mighty German Empire forged by Bismarck. The moral discourse engendered by the Eulenburg scandal led Viennese publicist Karl Kraus to coin the infamous phrase that Germans are ‘a people of judges and hangmen’ (*Das Volk der Richter und Henker*). The emergence of modern mass media allowed people across the globe to follow such ‘national’ scandals (usually centred on trials), which they often compared with other scandals both domestic and foreign. This dynamic highlighted the existence of a collective body of global knowledge. Pamphlets, treatises, newspaper and professional articles numbering in the thousands tried to make sense of the scandalous revelations emanating from the highest and the lowest circles of early twentieth-century German society.

In this context, I focus on how the new science of ‘sexology’ intervened in the Eulenburg scandal. It was especially Magnus Hirschfeld, then a leading expert on homosexuality, who used the affair as an opportunity to popularise controversial scientific knowledge, and who was himself scandalised in return. The term ‘homosexual’ was introduced into public discourse for the first time in the Eulenburg scandal, as was the debate over whether one was ‘born’ or ‘degenerated’ into homosexuality. Such wide-ranging exposure in the fledgling mass media meant that readers in Germany, France, Britain, or America learned much about homosexuality as a social reality, although such views were undoubtedly influenced by notions of whether or not homosexuality was still taboo.

Public accusations based on sexual morality

The first trial of the Eulenburg scandal involved German-Jewish journalist Maximilian Harden and Count Kuno von Moltke, the military commander of Berlin, one of the Emperor’s closest friends, and an alleged member of Prince Eulenburg’s homosexual *Camarilla*. It is crucial to note that the trial of Moltke vs. Harden was a civil suit, not a criminal trial, in which the Prussian General Kuno Moltke accused Harden of falsely spreading rumors about his homosexuality.

Indeed, the applicable provision, § 175 which penalised homosexual intercourse, played no role in the proceedings. Harden did not accuse Prince Eulenburg, Count Moltke and their friends of homosexual acts but rather of *being* “sexually abnormal”. From within this judicial forum, Harden let the public know that Moltke and Eulenburg called each other ‘Sweetie’ and ‘Old Badger’ while referring to William II as ‘Sweetheart’ in their correspondence. Involved as an expert witness was sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, who founded the world’s first committee for the legalisation and social acceptance of homosexuality in 1897.

Harden’s press campaign was premised on a conception of homophobia as a positive moral value wherein effeminate men are not only unworthy of any high office but also present a danger to international peace. The overwhelmingly male diplomatic corps knew, Harden believed,

that homosexuals shrink away from war in international crises. Comparing Harden's press campaign with Foucault's 'Crime and Punishment' theory it seems significant that Harden's public accusations were not intended to criminalise Eulenburg, Moltke, and their friends but demonstrate instead that these high ranking personalities were *morally inferior* and must, as a consequence, be excluded from German politics altogether.

A Prussian general beaten up by his wife

One vehicle through which Harden hoped to achieve his goal was the testimony of Lilly von Elbe, the disaffected ex-wife of Kuno. Lilly's wedding to Kuno was something of a "fairy tale", with William II himself serving as a witness at the ceremony. Appearing in court under the intense scrutiny of journalists from the world over, Lilly revealed scenes of her unhappy marriage that shocked the international public. She could prove that Kuno had termed marriage "swinishness", compared women to "water closets", and referred to the marriage-bed as a "bordello". She claimed that they never consummated their marriage because Kuno's only true love was his 'best friend', Philipp Eulenburg.

A bemused public learned, however, that Lilly was certainly not a typical female victim. Upon examination, it emerged that the Countess tore the epaulettes from Kuno's general's uniform and assaulted him so savagely that he could not appear at his own military headquarters. General Moltke's already tattered reputation received its coup de grâce when Lilly testified that Kuno wrote love letters to 'Philine' while pressing Eulenburg's handkerchief to his nose. It goes without saying that a public debate immediately ensued about the value of marriage, particularly with reference to the duties of husband and wife in both their private and public lives.

Power of definition – Power of sexology

Lilly's revelations about Kuno Moltke's private life formed the basis of Magnus Hirschfeld's sexological expertise. Following his motto *per scientiam ad veritatem*, Hirschfeld wanted to change social policy and overcome what he perceived as 'false morality'. His ambition was to create homosexual respectability by working together with police and courts, sending petitions to the Reichstag, and publishing one educational pamphlet after another. Some years before the trial, Hirschfeld asked for but failed to receive an audience with William II in order to explain the scientific positions towards homosexuality. Now, in a very public forum, he could raise the crucial question of sexology: "What is homosexuality and what is normality?". The Emperor, Germany, and the rest of the world would finally listen.

Hirschfeld's testimony concerning Moltke was based on the theory that:

Homosexual men are usually characterised by a higher sensibility and impressibility. Also, emotions dominate their life, a strong artistic sense, especially when it comes to music, often an inclination to mysticism, combined with all kinds of feminine affinities and passions, in the good and bad sense of the word. This blend does not make the homosexual inferior – he is not like the heterosexual – but he is of the same value.

As for Moltke himself, Hirschfeld argued that his 'whole personality is extraordinary enthusiastic and sentimental. All the aspects described by his former wife prove an aberrance from masculine normality.' Had Moltke provided evidence that he had had normal sexual intercourse before, during, or after his marriage, Hirschfeld might have come to a different conclusion. Without it, Hirschfeld had the chance to state, 'Homosexual love, as proven by this case, can be as pure as normal love.' To highlight the historical significance of this judgement, Hirschfeld evoked a most controversial British case: 'When the Count said: "My friendship is clear and pure as the sun" it reminded me of a similar scene from a different trial where the

homosexual question played a role, the trial of the unhappy poet Oscar Wilde. When Judge Gill asked him: “Which love are you actually talking about?” Wilde answered: “About a noble, wonderful form of affection that must not reveal its name in this century...”.

Sexology, private lives and the culture of law

The public vivisection of Moltke’s private life through legal proceedings was not merely courtroom melodrama. It was compelled by contemporary legal theory and practice and also lent legitimacy to the explanatory force of sexology. A tenet of German libel law was that there must exist proof for the truth of the public statements at issue. Thus, in order to prove his claim that Moltke was sexually abnormal, Harden had the right to collect evidence from Moltke’s private life which served both jurists and expert witnesses. Naturally such information was also publicised by court reporters and spread through the newspapers over the world.

In relation to sexology as a truth-finding tool, it is important to note that forensic medicine had already given up physical examinations to find evidence on the bodies of people suspected of homosexual intercourse by 1900. This paved the way for the use of psychoanalytical methods like sexology, methods that took into account every detail of private life, as well as subconscious feelings and even hearsay. As both institutions, science and law, had to come to authoritative conclusions, either in the form of scientific expertises or court decisions, personality profiles were created and used as ‘true’ forensic evidence. Still, Magnus Hirschfeld’s ability to establish definitions concerning individual sexuality was extraordinary and more far-reaching than other expert witnesses exercised in a German court drama. This is all the more astounding as his test specimen, Count Kuno Moltke, was one of the highest ranking Prussian generals and whose family name served as a national symbol of the German Empire.

Moral scandal and transnational press war

Transnationally, the trial was widely considered as indicative of Germany’s military and moral decline. Things got even worse when, accidentally, during the trial a number of ‘homosexual orgies’ involving the Prussian *Garde-du-Corps* were revealed. That neither Eulenburg nor Moltke had anything do with the abuse of soldiers by their officers did not temper the transnational press war over Germany’s national symbols, the beloved Army and the Moltke myth of 1866-1871.

The radical French magazine *L’Aurore* published an article that was commented on in many German newspapers:

The *fine fleur* of the military, diplomatic and mundane aristocracy convicted, to hear, how they drag their nefarious and dishonouring vices into broad daylight, the most adored names, some of them linked to that colossal work, the building of their empire, all that handed over to common mockery, the name of the monarch mentioned in that mud: What dishonour and humiliation on one day! Ah! They will not dare talk about the modern Babylon anymore which the great Richard Wagner used to sing about in trivial verses when we were beaten and in a sorry state!

Moral despair over the alleged loss of Prussian virility incited some rather extreme suggestions by German journalists as well, who now felt their prestige contested by their colleagues abroad:

Some of us might have thought, in these muggy days, of the word of old that a refreshing, cheerful war can be a blessing for a whole people. If God will assign that task to us and lead us into bloody fights, the German people in its overwhelming majority, the

German youth, the circles that are now under attack by malicious generalisation, they will all prove again that they have been taught how to die for the fatherland; then, finally, that disgusting dirt will be blown away by the storm wind.

If blowing away this “dirt” by starting a European war was not yet widely adhered to, most commentators from the left to the right agreed on the quality of homosexuality: “To hold family and women in high regard, that’s what our morality is based on. How women are honoured, that is the best indicator for a nation’s culture. Paederasty is an atavism back into barbarianism. Homosexuality is a morality for dogs. That must be said, grossly and clear-cut.”

Due to the institutions involved, with their symbolic power and moral relevance, the public discussion over homosexuality transformed itself into a considerable transnational press war. The involvement of a member of the Moltke family was not only seen in the French press as revenge for the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). The *Figaro* wrote, “There you have your virtuous and morally pure Germany! One thing is for sure: If such a trial wouldn’t play in Berlin but in France, the German newspapers would jump for joy. They would dwell on ample considerations about the decline of French morals.”

It was an international sensation when the court followed Hirschfeld’s expertise completely, judging ‘in the name of the Prussian King’ that Count Kuno Moltke was not only sexually abnormal but ‘subconsciously homosexual’. The living Prussian King’s reaction to the court’s decision is quite characteristic of prevailing authoritarian thought. Of the presiding judge, William II exclaimed, “That guy must be removed from office. He has downright betrayed the fatherland and all of us.” About the judgement’s social consequences, the monarch prophesied, ‘After this ridiculous trial, the duel will boom again, because it is impossible that gentlemen might appear again at the forum of so miserable sissies like these Prussian judges. The bullet remains our only salvation.’ This was, however, political thought in the truest sense of the word. In fact, this outburst of helplessness and moral confusion sheds a new light on the limitations of William II’s much disputed ‘personal rule’.

Heterosexual liberation through the backdoor of homophobia

It is no wonder that Magnus Hirschfeld and his sexological interpretations of the case were criticised ferociously by right-wing commentators: ‘So, Dr Hirschfeld’s scientific expertise would have been completely different if an old general of over 50 years had gone to the prostitutes! That’s what a forensic expert dares to tell the German people! ... It is absolutely justified that one characterises the behaviour of Dr Hirschfeld as a public danger!’

Yet the moral value of chastity and the supposedly immutable rule of ‘no sex before marriage’ were bent when it came to the higher moral value of homophobia. The same commentator had to admit, ‘It is more bearable for parents if their child falls prey to murderers than to homosexuals. Then you can at least mourn your child in honesty.’ After the trial, Dr Georg Merzbach, the Moltke family physician, thought it wise to defend Kuno Moltke’s heterosexual masculinity by breaking his oath of medical confidentiality. Kuno Moltke ‘has always had normal sexual intercourse, throughout his whole life’, even before marriage. Merzbach went so far as to cite several venereal diseases contracted by Moltke as clear evidence of his sexual conformity. Prescribing a trip to the bordello was part of sexological theory and practice circa 1900, and was intended to cure impotence, neuropathy and even homosexuality.

Despite heavy personal attacks on Magnus Hirschfeld, sexology was the big winner of the Eulenburg scandal. It became widely accepted as interpreter of human sexuality in all its aspects. Private life offered many “meaningful” secrets to serve as windows to the soul, and that was where Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis stepped in. Hirschfeld’s first expertise seemed scandalous to many conservative critics, but so strong was contemporary belief in science that even conservatives saw only one legitimate way of revising the result of the first Moltke vs. Harden case: a new sexological expertise. In the second Moltke-Harden trial, Magnus Hirschfeld finally

had to withdraw his first expert opinion. The only thing he was blamed for by those of his colleagues summoned to appear in the second trial was his having relied on a lying *femme fatale*. When the prosecutor threatened to reveal Hirschfield's own homosexuality, Hirschfield joined in the chorus of mainstream sexologists (among them Albert Eulenburg and Albert Moll) who characterised Lilly as a sadistic sex monster. Her testimony, they argued, was tainted by 'physical and psychological hysteria' and therefore was completely worthless. Together they declared that Count Kuno Moltke had a perfectly normal sexual orientation, and that his honour was 'spotlessly clean'.

Through the Eulenburg scandal, people learned much more about homosexuality as social reality than ever before. The very term 'homosexual', which had been used only by sexologists before, became everyday speech. Yet mere knowledge production did not automatically lead to more social 'tolerance'. Homosexual self-liberation failed. Homophobia was considered a moral value – even more important than old-fashioned chastity, as long as heterosexual masculinity was in doubt. Furthermore, sexology's intervention in the Eulenburg scandal did not rationalise public discourse. On the contrary: Public figures had to lead flawless sexual lives for fear that any "abnormal" detail might become public from one day to another. Where public figures can be destroyed morally, privacy and intimacy become disposable quantities, used and misused not only by the press. It is no coincidence that around the year 1900 the first 'home stories' were offered to journalists by monarchs, politicians and artists.

The Eulenburg affair, still seen as *the* homosexuality scandal of the twentieth-century, did not change moral notions of homosexuality but instead confirmed homophobia. Homosexuals, thenceforward, could only wait for increasing heterosexual *laissez-faire* to improve both their moral and legal standing in society. In defence of masculinity, however, sex beyond marriage became legitimate, even from a conservative point of view. For this reason, the Eulenburg scandal can be considered as a milestone of heterosexual liberation in Europe.