Science and Sex: Hirschfeld's Legacy

written by Peter Drucker | January 20, 2015

In the mostly forgotten history of early twentieth-century movements for sexual freedom, Magnus Hirschfeld's name is one of the most familiar—and one of the most contested. As a Jewish scientist who championed sexual deviants, he made a perfect target for the Nazis, who were tragically successful in extirpating much of his life's work. In Western Europe today, where gay rights is virtually a civic religion, he risks becoming one of its plaster saints; the Federal Republic of Germany established an official, publicly funded Magnus Hirschfeld Foundation in 2011.

Yet proponents of very different causes can quote Hirschfeld. In the introduction to the U.S. edition of Ralf Dose's welcome biography of Hirschfeld, Dose asserts that contemporary theorists of genetic homosexuality like Simon LeVay "can easily be located in the research tradition of Magnus Hirschfeld." But, Dose adds, Hirschfeld's concept of "sexual intermediacy" has attracted "an entirely new kind of interest" from queer theorists (10), who have as little use for LeVay as LeVay does for them. In short, "Hirschfeld's is a complicated legacy" (15).

Politically, too, different currents can claim him. Clearly he was a man of the left, a socialist. Caught up in the German revolution of 1918, he became tremendously influential in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Yet once the Nazis had consolidated their power in 1933, two years before his death, he wrote that "the three great democracies—France, England, and America"—were the world's main hope for escaping both fascism and Bolshevism (91).

In this respect history did not fully vindicate him. France, Britain, and the United States did ultimately win World War II, putting an end to the Nazi regime. But the Allied victory did not entirely undo the Nazis' suppression of the pre-war left and sexual liberation movements. In West Germany laws against homosexuality remained on the books until the late 1960s, and were repealed only after the shattered gay movement managed to rebuild itself. One writer observed in 1962, "For homosexuals the Third Reich has not yet come to an end" (14).

Concise Introduction

Dose's short book gives a sense of how renowned Hirschfeld was in his time as the director of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. Over the years celebrities like André Gide and Sergei Eisenstein visited the institute. Walter Benjamin, Christopher Isherwood, and Ernst Bloch actually lived there for a time. The book's many pages of photos show how extraordinarily extensive the institute's collections were—raided and burned in 1933 in one of the Nazis' first acts after taking power.

In barely 100 pages, Dose manages to give most readers the basic facts of Hirschfeld's life. He begins with an account of Hirschfeld's family, childhood, education, medical practice, religious beliefs, literary interests, finances, and personal habits. Only after this does Dose move on to what most readers will probably care about most: Hirschfeld's path-breaking roles as a sexologist and campaigner for sexual freedom.

The biography is particularly useful in piercing the veil of Hirschfeld's own personal life, about which he was understandably discrete. Karl Giese, a much younger working-class man, moved in with Hirschfeld in 1919 and took over the housekeeping, though some of Hirschfeld's close associates only realized later that the two were a couple. In Hirschfeld's last years the young Chinese man Li Shiu Tong moved in with the two of them, prompting much gossip among those who

knew them. These details shed light on Hirschfeld's special interest in same-sex relationships between people of different generations and/or gender roles.

"Third Sex"

For Hirschfeld, "Only an objective and scientific study of [humanity], and of sex, can prepare the way for the complete realization of human sex rights" (63). He is probably remembered most for his theory that homosexuals—or at least some of them—constituted a "third sex." The Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, founded at his initiative in 1897 to campaign for decriminalizing homosexuality, cited the theory often to argue that homosexuality was congenital and therefore innocent. The committee's informational brochure on homosexuality, published in 1903, was even entitled *What Should the People Know about the Third Sex?*

Yet Dose shows that Hirschfeld's thought was subtler than the phrase "third sex" suggests, and subtler than many theories of "sexual inversion" that preceded his. Like Alfred Kinsey later, Hirschfeld had the insatiable curiosity of a collector, and his writings made clear the great variety of human sexual impulses, which no one theory could circumscribe. His wide-ranging ideas about "sexual intermediacy," both physical and cultural, foreshadowed the study today of both intersex and transgender identities. Harry Benjamin, later a pioneer in working with transsexuals in the United States, was in close contact with the Institute for Sexual Science in the 1920s. Hirschfeld's thought also constitutes an enduring challenge to what Lisa Duggan has called "homonormative" definitions of lesbian/gay orientation,[1] which try to purge it of any hint of gender nonconformity.

The third-sex conception was vigorously contested in Hirschfeld's own time, both in his own circle and even more in the broader German gay movement. Scientific-Humanitarian Committee member Benedict Friedländer considered the approach a "beggarly theory" that portrayed homosexuals as "psychological freaks of nature" and "poor female souls" (43). Adolf Brand's Community of the Special, a rival organization to Hirschfeld's Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, opposed the theory even more fiercely. Brand was interested only in defending men whose love for other men was manly and preferably impeccably German and martial.[2]

Magnus Hirschfeld also makes clear that homosexuality was not always the main focus of the organizations Hirschfeld worked in. Dose points out that the World League for Sexual Reform focused more on issues like birth control, abortion, and sex education than homosexuality. Hirschfeld himself was well known in his own time as an advocate of eugenics. The Nazis' vicious measures against people with disabilities, up to and including extermination, have rightly given eugenics a very bad name on the left. Before World War II the left as well as the right was complicit in some of the worst of eugenic thinking. Yet historians have not yet fully explored the content of pre-war left-wing "eugenics," or made clear whether "eugenics" meant exactly the same thing on the left as on the right.

Sex and Socialism

Dose gives some interesting background to Hirschfeld's lifelong association with the socialist movement. Hirschfeld was a student when he first met Social Democratic leader August Bebel. Their personal connection was useful in inducing Bebel to introduce and defend the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee's petition for the decriminalization of homosexuality in the Reichstag. Hirschfeld was himself an active member of the Association of Socialist Physicians.

Besides socialism, Hirschfeld had close ties to German feminism, notably the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform. He joined feminists in campaigning for reform of the divorce laws and for abortion rights. Among his acquaintances and allies in the United States were

Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger.

Hirschfeld's Jewish background inclined him to the left, since the German right in his time was so anti-Semitic. In the 1920s anti-Semitic right-wingers once beat him up and left him for dead. Even within the gay movement, Hirschfeld's right-wing adversary Adolf Brand printed an anti-Semitic caricature of Hirschfeld in Brand's magazine *Der Eigene*. Although like many German Jews Hirschfeld had a strong sense of German identity, in the end he wrote, "If I frame the question as: 'Are you a German—a Jew—or a world citizen?' then my answer is always 'world citizen' or 'all three'" (37).

Dose does not give a full sense of how closely Hirschfeld was sometimes associated with the far left. Hirschfeld called, at the outbreak of the German revolution in November 1918, for a "true people's state with a genuinely democratic structure" and a "social republic."[3] He had a significant influence on Soviet sexual policies in the 1920s. His work was cited for example in the discussions that led to the decriminalization of homosexuality in the Soviet Union in 1922. Soviet Health Commissar Nikolai Semashko and Institute of Neuropsychiatric Prophylaxis director Lev Rozenshtein visited the Institute for Sexual Science; Hirschfeld reciprocated with a visit to Moscow in 1926.[4]

"Just Begun"

The praise that Dose's book has received, from both gay and queer activists like David Fernbach and Peter Tatchell and historians like James Steakley, John D'Emilio, and Dagmar Herzog, suggests how badly a biography of Hirschfeld was needed. But when it comes to summing up Hirschfeld's legacy, Dose's book is more tantalizing than definitive. The book's subtitle and its occasional passing references to contemporary debates raise fascinating issues, without delving deeply into any of them. As Dose writes, the debate on Hirschfeld's legacy "has just begun" (15).

The history of the twentieth century has made us more skeptical of the idea that there is a straight road leading, in the words engraved on Hirschfeld's tomb, "through science to justice." Yet understanding remains indispensable in the quest for freedom. Dose's biography reminds us of the contribution that Hirschfeld made to both.