

*Critical Studies in Gender, Sexuality, and Culture*



MAGNUS HIRSCHFELD AND THE QUEST  
FOR SEXUAL FREEDOM

A History of the First International Sexual  
Freedom Movement

*Elena Mancini*



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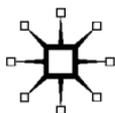
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# **Magnus Hirschfeld and the Quest for Sexual Freedom**

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Elena Mancini

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MAGNUS HIRSCHFELD AND THE QUEST FOR SEXUAL FREEDOM

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*To my parents,  
Lucia Buonaiuto and Francesco Mancini*

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## Prologue

*He, who has no strength to dream, has no strength to live.*

—Ernst Toller

Magnus Hirschfeld was the first to achieve significant milestones in the modern history of sexual reform, yet he is scarcely known outside of the confines of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community and queer and sexuality studies. He founded the world's first sexual research institute in Berlin and was a pioneering researcher and writer on homosexuality and variant sexual behavior. His oeuvre comprises over 2,000 titles. A dedicated sexual clinician who counseled vast numbers of sexual minorities on how to honor and navigate the pragmatic realities of their sexual natures in a society that stigmatized their identity, he fought against the criminalization and pathologization of homosexuality.

By educating the public through his writings and advocacy, garnering the support of influential political figures, and reaching out to members of the cultural and scientific community and the broader public, Hirschfeld led a rigorous and steadfast campaign against the German anti-homosexual statute known as Paragraph 175. This legal statute against homosexuality was known in the Prussian penal code prior to the German Unification in 1871 as Paragraph 143. The Prussian statute was extended throughout the German Empire after the Unification under Bismarck. Charges of homosexuality against men were often brought up in court, and if defendants were deemed guilty a prison sentence of up to ten years could ensue.

Hirschfeld's theory of sexual intermediaries exposed the epistemological and empirical limits of the fixed dual-gender system and advanced the notion of the fluidity of gender in its stead. By destabilizing the artificially constructed categories of male and female, Hirschfeld's theory accounted for and scientifically legitimated myriad expressions or gradations of intersexed identities. Put differently,

his theory incontrovertibly radicalized or “queered” culturally constructed gender ideals of masculinity or femininity.

He was the first researcher to devote an entire study to the phenomenon of cross-dressing, and it was he who coined the term “transvestite.” He published his study on transvestitism in 1910, a 400-page opus aptly titled *Die Tranvestiten*<sup>1</sup> (The Transvestites). While Hirschfeld never formally identified the phenomenon of transgenderism with a distinct term, he was the first to identify clinically the phenomenon of transgenderism and differentiate it from transvestitism.

Hirschfeld and his Institute for Sexual Sciences also bear the singular distinction of performing the first sex reassignment operation in the world, under his supervision in 1931. Such operations reached a peak in demand in Germany in the 1930s, and Hirschfeld was widely sought out for his expertise.<sup>2</sup> His recommendations for surgery were deemed definitive, and, in one instance, Hirschfeld even succeeded in convincing the German government to pay for a male to female genital surgery. Even for today’s standards, this constitutes a significant achievement, but for a German Jewish physician who was kept under close watch by right wing factions and guardians of bourgeois sexual mores in scientific and civic posts, this approval signified a momentous affirmation of Hirschfeld and his theories.

Hirschfeld’s research attracted many of the leading sexologists, psychiatrists, and sexual activists of his time. Sigmund Freud publicly acknowledged his achievements in sexology. Despite the conceptual and methodological differences that defined their work, the early phase of their acquaintance was characterized by mutual influence, lively theoretical exchanges, and congenial professional collaboration. Each contributed to one another’s journals periodically and participated in one another’s professional organizations. Hirschfeld was an active member of the Psychoanalytic Association and also helped found the Berlin chapter of the International Psychoanalytic Society, along with fellow founder of sexology, Iwan Bloch, and the psychoanalysts Karl Abraham, Otto Juliusburger, and Heinrich Koerber, in 1908. Freud was also a member of the Institute for Sexual Sciences. In fact, Hirschfeld collaborated with many of the most prominent psychologists and sexual reformers of his time. Among these were Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Iwan Bloch, Karl Abraham, August Forel, Albert Moll, Max Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, Helene Stöcker, Havelock Ellis, and Max Hodann. Hirschfeld’s achievements were also publicly acknowledged by Margaret Sanger, the American birth control pioneer and founder of Planned Parenthood who visited Hirschfeld’s

Institute for Sexual Sciences in the early 1920s. She was struck by the photographs of the transvestites that hung in Hirschfeld's institute, remarked that rather than the expressions of fear and insecurity that often characterized transvestites, those treated by Hirschfeld bore a mien of pride and self-confidence.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of World War I, Hirschfeld had achieved international renown for his work, and he began holding lecture tours on all aspects of sexuality around the globe. While his growing reputation and the implications of his sexual theories—which challenged nationalist ideals of heroic masculinity and the traditional family—caused him to become the target and victim of anti-Semitic attacks, his institute and clinical practice were able to thrive under the social democratic government of the Weimar Republic. He was able to enlist the support of key government figures for the repeal of Paragraph 175, and for many of the causes that were central to the women's movement and the campaign to extended sexual freedom to all. Unsuccessful in achieving ultimate abolishment of the anti-homosexual statute, Hirschfeld, nevertheless, had led an remarkably influential, unprecedented pro-homosexual campaign for over three decades.

As a clinician, Hirschfeld was widely sought out by homosexuals, intersexed individuals, and those whose desires, appearances, and orientation did not fit into the heteronormative dual scheme of gender. Seen both as an undisputed expert on the topic of sexuality and a professed advocate for the emancipation of homosexuals and sexual minorities, the sexually stigmatized masses and individuals in need of guidance with regard to their sexual identity flocked to him for insight, counsel, and medical treatment. Hirschfeld encouraged his patients to deepen their self-understanding of their conditions or desires and advised them on how to both live in a manner that promoted their authenticity and prevented them from falling victims to the laws.

As the escalation of the right wing forces during the final years of the Weimar Republic caused the situation to grow perilous beyond all doubt for Hirschfeld, he decided to expand his reach beyond Europe and embark upon a world lecture tour and an ethnographic tour of the sexual customs of Asia and Northern Africa. He traveled to the United States, Japan, China, India, Burma, Palestine, and Egypt, and produced a foundational work in sexual ethnography that evinces a conscious eschewal of a Euro-centric perspective. In its stead, he offered a condemnation of European imperialism. In surveying the profuse diversity of sexual practices he witnessed, he resisted exploitative stances of exoticization or judgment. Instead, he concluded that

cultural dogma and religious morals posed arbitrary hindrances to a deeper understanding of human sexuality, and that there was no uniform method or rule to judge the broad spectrum of human sexual expression. If there was overarching ethic that informed his approach to difference it was “panhumanism,” the belief that human beings were by far fundamentally more similar than different to one another, and the qualities and behaviors that united them were by far more productive to evaluate than their differences, which he claimed were minor. It was his uncompromised acceptance, rather than suppression, of difference that allowed him to advocate an egalitarian emphasis on sameness. This perspective also informed his perspectives on sexuality and race science, which he denounced in a series of articles, posthumously published in a volume entitled *Racism*.

In India, Hirschfeld was dubbed the “Vatsayana of the West,” and in the United States the press greeted him as the “Dr. Einstein of Sex”.<sup>4</sup> He became acquainted with American sexologists William Robinson and Harry Benjamin. Robinson was so impressed with Hirschfeld’s institute and the progressive sexual reforms that it proposed that he made serious efforts to bring Hirschfeld to the United States in order to have him found an institute for sexual science there, modeled after the one in Berlin. Robinson was unsuccessful in this endeavor. Among the causes to have likely contributed to his inability to secure the necessary support and resources to execute such a venture was the American social climate of the 1930s. In a country still reeling from the Great Depression and not entirely free from its own forms of anti-Semitism, it is improbable that the climate would have been ripe for welcoming an institute as progressive as Hirschfeld’s.

All of these remarkable contributions beg the question as to why Hirschfeld has been so neglected, underrated, and dismissed. One historically immediate cause is the Nazi obliteration of Hirschfeld’s works in Germany and the continued relevance of the Jewish stigma during the 1930s, and the immediate postwar years through the 1960s in Germany contributed to the suppression of his message and works. Most of his works that managed to eschew annihilation had been preserved by his friends and colleagues on foreign soil.

During the postwar years, Hirschfeld’s scientific approach became widely misunderstood. He has been fallaciously accused of paving the road to Adolf Hitler’s genocides through the practice of eugenic science. To be sure, the theories of Charles Darwin and heredity science were widely influential in late nineteenth century Germany, and were perverted and misunderstood in many ways. However, not

all scientists distorted these theories, and even fewer carried out the nefarious consequences of these theories for segments of the population. While it is true that Hirschfeld practiced a form of sexual hygiene—a science to which many of Hirschfeld’s social democratic contemporaries subscribed—in his pursuit of sexual reform, causes which included the implications of his science were not even remotely genocidal. Though he believed in a benevolent application of eugenics, he held that man was a joint product of heredity and environment. His advocacy of causes for sexual reform, which included the liberalization of contraception, the right to legal and safe abortions, the enhancement of sexual pleasure, combating alcoholism, and the promotion of healthy births sought to enhance the individual’s sexual freedoms and choices. In no instance did his science seek the promotion of any race ideal. If anything, Hirschfeld’s thought was inherently antithetical to any hierarchical ordering of humanity, and he expressly called for a eugenics freed of racism and colonialism.

Hirschfeld’s practice of science by arguing the innateness of homosexuality has further contributed to his unwarranted obscurity and invalidation as an exemplary precursor for LGBT rights discourse. Critical theory’s denunciation of instrumental science and its totalizing effects through its most renowned practitioners, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have justifiably inserted unsettling doubts about the uses of science in society. The same, though to a lesser extent, holds true for the enduring currency of Foucauldian rejection of science as an oppressive articulation of power and imperialism, and as post-modernism and queer theory’s aversion toward restrictive categories or labels. Critics who resort to discrediting Hirschfeld’s work by leveraging such arguments against his scientific approach are grossly misguided. True, a number of the scientific theories that he relied upon have proved themselves outdated, and some of the experiments and therapies in which he engaged were faulty and positivistic in reach, but while flawed at times, he was always willing to revise his position and never lost sight of the ethical humanistic referent in his work.

What eludes many of those who engage in a wholesale dismissal of Hirschfeld on the basis of his science is the historical connection between the rise of the scientific method and the legitimation of political resistance. Maintaining a historical perspective on the role that science played during Hirschfeld’s lifetime would allow these critics to see that science offered a legitimate means of resisting dogma and the use of arbitrary power. Considering what the method of scientific inquiry represented during the age of Bacon in many senses yields

insights into the possibilities that the practice of the natural sciences continued to hold out during Hirschfeld's lifetime:

Since science is an ongoing process, an activity which is based on its capacity for self-correction and the ethic of questioning established authority, the birth of the scientific method in the early seventeenth century heralded the dawn of an era in which elements of modern political thought we take for granted were established. Francis Bacon embodied this spirit of resistance and saw the necessity of questioning authority, just as he embodied a drive for the creative exploration of nature for the purpose of benefiting humanity.<sup>5</sup>

Also lost on these critics seems to be the historical context in which Hirschfeld was operative. In a climate in which normative views on gender intersected with technological instruments for exacting greater measures of social control, arguing that certain traits and behaviors were innate—that is to say, in nature and beyond an individual's ability to choose—offered a means of making a humanistic appeal for tolerance.

Characterized by an ethic that privileged the universal over the particular, Hirschfeld's appeals for sexual equality did not only militate against sexual prejudices and hierarchies, but against racial and political ones as well. Hirschfeld's was a classic liberal stance. His advocacy for homosexual emancipation, women's rights, and racial and sexual minorities was typified by an approach that linked the interests of minority groups to universal causes, specifically, the construction of an open, free political community where difference would not be punished by exclusion and out-dated hierarchies and personal distinctions would no longer translate into unequal relations of power.<sup>6</sup> Privileging particular subjectivities was not how Hirschfeld approached his struggle for equality. That is to say, Hirschfeld did not argue for homosexual rights by focusing on homosexuals in terms of what we would today call a single-interest group. Quite the contrary, Hirschfeld stressed the normalcy and universal character of difference and linked to it the vastly variable character of human sexual preference. Hirschfeld's purpose of foregrounding the richly varied nature of human desire was not to highlight different category groups in order to show how they measured up to a normative ideal, but rather to underscore the commonness and universally human character of the variability of desire.

To be sure, nineteenth-century science and early sexology operated with hierarchial understandings of difference. These were decisive in shaping the way in which sexual identities were studied, evaluated

and treated in public discourse. The scientific practices of fastidious classification and the cataloguing of sexual types that became widely popular during the Victorian era and the Wilhelmine period were critical in generating a heightened concern with difference. Sexual practices and character traits that deviated from the so-called norm gave rise to laws and social policies and judgmental social attitudes that not only inhibited the expression of sexual character and identity, but also led to cruel and lengthy prison sentences.

Hirschfeld recast the meaning of difference. For him, understanding difference did not entail a new set of value judgments, but rather an enriched awareness of sexuality that inspired him to fight to extend the category of freedom to those to whom it was previously denied. Hirschfeld's approach, of seeking to reform anti-homosexual legislature and to remove the stigma of homosexuality, had social, cultural, and political implications, and it was resonant with the liberal socialist tradition<sup>7</sup> that privileged science over ideology and shunned the conflation of fact and value. His practice of science was characterized by a privileging of "what is" as opposed to "what ought to be."<sup>8</sup> He had the fervent belief that by honoring what, in today's view, are considered the classic positivistic traits of science—objectivity, verification, and repeatability—the moral and theological claims with regard to the unnaturalness<sup>9</sup> or depravedness of homosexuality could be effectively debunked.

Finally, the impetus for my undertaking this work on Magnus Hirschfeld can be distilled as three-fold. The first is to offer a corrective to Hirschfeld's undue obscurity and to dispel the mischaracterizations of him. At stake is not an arcane topic of historical interest, but the recovery of Hirschfeld's ethical humanistic perspective, which sought to expand the horizons of sexual experience and legitimate the expression of difference on a universal level.

The second motivation has to do with the way in which Hirschfeld—to the extent that he is known—is identified in the English-speaking context. This work makes no pretense about offering a comprehensive study of his ideas or scientific contributions, nor does it have the pretense of displacing previous scholarship on the subject matter. My work distinguishes itself from previous works published on Hirschfeld both in English and in German by emphasizing Hirschfeld's liberal humanistic approach in emancipating marginalized groups, linking this ethic to the present struggle for sexual equality. Stressing the fact that Hirschfeld's reach extended beyond that of pioneering sexologist and a homosexual rights activist, as he is commonly portrayed, this work will emphasize Hirschfeld's humanistic values and cosmopolitan perspective, and it will demonstrate that

his fight for sexual freedom was not only intended to serve individual minority groups but also addressed a wide range of problems that affected the broader populace. Sexual education, the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, alcoholism, domestic violence, homosexual suicide and blackmail, unwanted pregnancies, and marital counseling were all issues that Hirschfeld actively addressed in his research, activism, and clinical practice.

The overwhelming majority of the scholarship that positively appraises Hirschfeld's contributions tends to foreground his vocation as a sexologist but fail to illuminate how he impacted the cultural and political realities of his time. They are focus too narrowly on his scientific theories at the expense of the broader humanistic ideas and values that, I believe, lie at the heart of Hirschfeld as a thinker, activist, and as a person worthy of resurrecting for present debates. Each of the scholarly works may make connections between his science and his political activity, but they interpret his strength primarily as a figure who argued for legal reform. They fail to see the deeper implications of his scientific efforts, the tradition from which they emerged, and, I think most importantly, the ethical perspective which informed both his scientific enterprise and his political activism.

Up until the present, the only English-language, full-length biography of Magnus Hirschfeld has been Charlotte Wolff's, *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology*.<sup>10</sup> As the first published biography on Hirschfeld available to an audience that otherwise may not have access to his works, Wolff's work represents a commendably accomplished contribution. However, there are two critical ways in which Wolff's work requires redress and supplement. The first is that Wolff fails to grasp the full extent and implication of Hirschfeld's doctrine of sexual intermediaries.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, while Wolff's work evinces the mining of many primary resources and offers an expansive and detailed portrayal of the cultural and scientific contexts in which Hirschfeld operated, her work falls short of offering any in-depth intellectual historical perspective of how his theories and advocacy impacted broader cultural, political, and scientific discourses. There is no sense of why Hirschfeld's method matters, how he fits into the German tradition that nourished his ethical impulse, and how his unique perspective on science, clinical practice, and political activism was central to his thought and how it could be useful in contemporary discussions. Hirschfeld's advocacy of sexual minorities and rejection of race science was deeply informed by his cosmopolitan perspective. Barely adumbrated is Hirschfeld's liberal humanistic

outlook and the fact that his science, activism, and clinical work and ethnography entailed a questioning of authority, a deep ethical contestation of inequality with implications for anti-fascism, and a global, anti-imperialist perspective.

The third motivation was the timing of this work. I believe that we are at a time in which reconstructing Hirschfeld's unique liberal, humanistic, cosmopolitan vantage point is needed. Well past the door of the twenty-first century, sexual, ethnic, and racial minorities around the globe continue to be exposed to violent and heinous acts of cruelty and injustice. Most reprehensibly, there are still governments under which being gay constitutes a criterion for capital punishment. In the supposedly more economically developed and democratic global West, violent acts of hatred—including murder toward sexual minorities—up until recently continued to be met with little consequences, the exclusion of openly gay people in the military was a foregone conclusion, and marriage equality continues to remain chimera in many states across the United States. What I am suggesting here is not a reinterpretation of Hirschfeld that disregards the great divide between Hirschfeld's historical context and the present. In fact, I privilege terms like "homosexual," "transvestite," and "hermaphrodite" throughout my treatment of Hirschfeld's work, as opposed to the contemporary terms in usage. Rather, I am proposing that his ethic be revitalized and reinterpreted for the present in order to link it to a broader phenomenon, and that is how to approach the challenges of diversity. Part of that test entails, as Hirschfeld attempted to show, accepting the challenge of recognizing the universal right for the coexistence of plural, multifarious expressions of sexual and racial identities and religions in a manner that does not practice the exclusion of others. Pragmatically, it also entails the recognition that sexual freedom as an enterprise requires its proponents to identify an objective referent, the unity and solidarity of like-minded forces, and an appeal to democratic institutions. It is not the celebration or fetishization of an individual identity and the willful severing from majorities currently practiced by many single-issue identity groups. Hirschfeld gave living testament to the ethical horizon that holds that "an injury to one is an injury to all."<sup>12</sup> This perspective remains relevant for us now and in need of being put into practice anew.

Chapter 1 of this work attends to Hirschfeld's early years, cultural influences, and his path to science.

Chapter 2 discusses the ethical and scientific debates around homosexuality and the evolution of his science.

Chapter 3 sheds light upon Hirschfeld's activism, stance and service in World War I, and participation in the predominant cultural and political discourses on sexuality.

Chapter 4 focuses on Hirschfeld's anti-fascist stance, unique cosmopolitan perspective, and his final years.

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