

Frackman, Kyle. "Hirschfeld, Magnus." *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Love, Courtship, and Sexuality through History: The Nineteenth Century*. Vol. 5. Ed. Susan Mumm. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008. 111-13. Print.

### **Hirschfeld, Magnus (1868-1935)**

Born in Kolberg (Pomerania), Germany, Magnus Hirschfeld became one of the most prominent sexologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hirschfeld was instrumental in the propagation of the theory of the so-called "third sex" (*das dritte Geschlecht*), an intermediate stage of gender and sexuality between homosexuals and heterosexuals. Building on the work of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895), who is credited by some with the creation of the word "homosexual," Hirschfeld spent most of his life advocating for the rights of homosexual women and men, specifically, and for sexual reform, in general, and went on to found the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee) and the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute for Sexual Science) in Berlin.

Hirschfeld grew up in a well-known Jewish family. His father, Dr. Hermann Hirschfeld, was a physician and philanthropist who was revered by his community. The elder Hirschfeld's social conscience and medical approach influenced the younger Hirschfeld's own later work in science, and Hirschfeld held his father and his father's work in high regard (Wolff 25). The course of study, which led him to a medical degree in 1892 was not Hirschfeld's only academic experience. Before studying medicine, Hirschfeld had begun a course of study of philology and literature in Breslau, though he eventually became more committed to the idea of working in the same field as his father. Hirschfeld's

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interest in language and writing stayed with him nonetheless throughout the rest of his life (Wolff 26, 28).

In 1896 Hirschfeld wrote an article (under a pseudonym, Theodor Ramien) that would signal a new focus in his life. Published by Max Spohr in Leipzig, "*Sappho und Sokrates, Wie erklärt sich die Liebe der Männer und Frauen zu Personen des eigenen Geschlechts*" ("Sappho and Sokrates, How Does One Explain the Love of Men and Women for People of Their Own Sex"), was Hirschfeld's first attempt at arguing that same-sex sexuality should be viewed as natural and certainly not prohibited by law. In this article, Hirschfeld began his lifelong work for public acceptance of homosexuals and "sexual variants."

Hirschfeld's theories of sexuality built on the work of psychiatrist and sex researcher, Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902), and Ulrichs. Like Krafft-Ebing, Hirschfeld believed firmly that homosexuality and transvestism (a term and category that Hirschfeld is credited with creating) were not diseases, but rather sexual variants. Though he did not, at least at first, proclaim the equality of sexual variants with normative heterosexuality, Hirschfeld did view these variants as a kind of congenital defect that in no way affected the potential and capabilities of a person (Wolff 36-37). Preceding the work of American sex researcher Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) and Kinsey's scale of human sexuality, Hirschfeld created his own scale of "quantity of desire" that had ten degrees of intensity, marking

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homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality as weak, moderate, or strong, according to where an individual's desire fell on his scale (Wolff 34-35).

On 15 May 1897, Hirschfeld, along with Spohr (who had published Hirschfeld's "Sappho and Socrates" article) and Edward Oberg, a German railway official, founded the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee. Soon joined by other men, this organization's primary concern was the abolishment of the German law that prohibited (male) same-sex eroticism, Paragraph 175. The Committee's first action was the January 1898 petition in the German *Reichstag* (Parliament) to do away with this law. Though this first attempt failed, petitions were introduced later with many more signatures, including those of such famous writers and intellectuals as Gerhard Hauptmann (1862-1946), Heinrich Zille (1858-1929), Heinrich Mann (1871-1950), Thomas Mann (1875-1955; later withdrawn), Frank Wedekind (1864-1918), and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926).

In his fight against Paragraph 175, Hirschfeld made use of the publicity surrounding the suicides of many high-ranking officers, civil servants, and other prominent members of German society. At the turn of the twentieth century, Germany found itself in a climate of extreme (homo)sexual suspicion; rumors circulated about the Kaiser, members of the Kaiser's social circle, and many members of the nobility. Hirschfeld often referred to this climate of blackmail and denunciation in his own struggles against discriminatory laws, claiming that prohibitions like Paragraph 175 cultivated such an environment (Wolff 61).

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In 1919 Hirschfeld created the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. The Institute combined various branches of science in the pursuit of research on and about sex, sexuality, and sexual behaviors. Not only did the Institute serve as a headquarters for academic inquiry, but it also offered testing for venereal disease, marriage and career counseling, family planning services, and library services. Hirschfeld's Institute eventually became the first announced target of the Nazis' destruction of "objectionable" books in May of 1933 (Steakley 103). The Institute's library was burned and a bust of Hirschfeld was also thrown onto the fire, an incident that Hirschfeld himself witnessed in newsreels while on a lecture trip to Paris. Hirschfeld remained in exile in Paris and attempted to re-establish a sexual science institute there until his death in 1935.

During his lifetime, Hirschfeld contributed actively to the medical and scientific discourse on sexuality. He was an editor of and contributor to the *Jahrbücher für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (*Yearbooks for Sexual Intermediates*; 1899-1923), in whose first issue Hirschfeld stated his hope that Paragraph 175 would not survive into the twentieth century. Starting in 1908, Hirschfeld edited *Die Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* (*The Journal for Sexual Science*). Hirschfeld's many other works include "*Was soll das Volk vom dritten Geschlecht wissen?*" ("What Should the People Know about the Third Sex?"; 1901), *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht* (*Berlin's Third Sex*; 1904), *Die Homosexualität des Mannes und des Weibes* (*Homosexuality of Men and Women*; 1914), and

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*Geschlechtskunde* (Sexology; 5 vols., 1928-1930). The work of Hirschfeld and the Institute of Sexual Science was most recently depicted in Rosa von Praunheim's 1999 film, *Der Einstein des Sex* (*The Einstein of Sex*).

### **Suggested Reading**

Steakley, James D. *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (Salem, NH: Ayer, 1975).

Wolff, Charlotte. *Magnus Hirschfeld: A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology* (London: Quartet, 1986).

Kyle E. Frackman