‘Race’, Normativity and the History of Sexuality:

Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Racism* and Early Twentieth-Century Sexology

Heike Bauer

**Abstract**

This article explores intersections between ‘race’ and sexuality in the work of Magnus Hirschfeld, and its racialized reception. Hirschfeld, a Jewish German homosexual physician and activist, was instrumental in establishing sexology in Germany during the first three decades of the twentieth-century, until his lifework was destroyed by the Nazi regime. He is best known today for his theorisations of sexuality. However, following the events of 1933 he turned his attention from sexuality to an analysis of racism, which became one of the first studies of this kind. The article retraces key moments in the formation and destruction of Hirschfeld’s sexology, and his own critique of racism, in a bid to address broader questions about the politics of biological and cultural normativity. It argues that while for Hirschfeld the ‘natural human’ was sexualized, he considered his or her racialisation an invention of normative discourses that aimed to naturalise scientific ideas as universal ‘truths’.

**Keywords:** sexology, race, Magnus Hirschfeld, sexual theory
In 1938, one of the first modern studies of *Racism* was published. This was the English translation of a hitherto unpublished German work, written by the Jewish sexologist and homosexual rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld during the last years of his life in exile from the Nazis in Nice. By the time of his death in 1935, Hirschfeld had gained an international reputation as one of the most influential sexologists and activists of his time. As founder of the world’s first journal dedicated to same-sex sexuality, ethnographer of metropolitan same-sex and transgender cultures across the globe, and as architect of the first Institute for Sexual Sciences in Berlin, Hirschfeld played a key role in the institution of sexology, combining his scientific efforts with political activism that focused specifically on the decriminalization of sex between men in Germany (Haeberle, 1984; Wolff, 1986; Herzer, 2001; Dose, 2004). *Racism* stands out from Hirschfeld extensive *oeuvre*, which, while wide-reaching in scope and approach, nevertheless predominantly focuses on matters of ‘sex’. Sexuality for Hirschfeld, as critics commonly agree, was firmly anchored in debates about what is natural human behaviour (Haeberle, 1984; Wolff, 1986; Herzer, 2001; Dose, 2004). *Racism* complicates the picture. It shows, I argue, that while for Hirschfeld the ‘natural human’ was sexualized, the reception of his sexology which led him to argue that the racialisation of the human is an invention of normative discourses which aim to naturalise scientific ‘truths’ to specific political effects.

This article scrutinizes what the complex intersections between ‘race’ and sexuality in Hirschfeld’s work and its reception can tell us about shaping, function and politics of normative discourses about nature and culture, or, in the language of present-day criticism, essentialism and constructivism. It begins with consideration of the theoretical stakes of this investigation, before tracking a history of Hirschfeld’s
sexology in Germany that focuses specifically on the racialised reception of the sexologist and his ‘Jewish’ discipline. This in turn will provide the background for a more detailed examination of Racism in the final part of the article. Racism shows, I argue, that Hirschfeld had complicated and at times apparently contradictory ideas about identity and identification in relation to ‘race’ and ‘sex’, which provide some insights into the politics behind his conception of sexual and racial norms. Specifically, Racism draws attention to the apparent paradox that Hirschfeld, while rejecting the idea of a biological ‘racial type’, nevertheless held on to the notion of an innate and universal ‘sexual type’. In so doing, I argue, Hirschfeld deliberately made use of strategic essentialism in relation to sexuality to deconstruct essentialist ideas about ‘race’.

‘Race’, Normativity and the History of Sexuality

The broader objective of this investigation, then, is to consider the impact of issues of ‘race’ on sexology in the early twentieth century as a way into rethinking some of the debates about normativity and the racialised boundaries of existing histories of sexuality. This is not to return to the discussions about what historian Carolyn Dean has so aptly identified as the ‘basically fantasmic relationship between Nazism, Hitler and homosexuality’ that has exercised an influential and diverse band of postwar thinkers such as Theodor Adorno and Wilhelm Reich, who, while trying to fathom the origins of fascism, ‘equated totalitarianism generally with male homosexuality’ (Dean, 2004: 109). Equally, the article does not attempt to provide a history of sexology akin to Stephen Frosh’s magisterial study of how ‘the now well-mined buried history of psychoanalysis in the Third Reich reveals a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious affiliations and renunciations whereby genuine if (with
hindsight) misguided efforts to preserve psychoanalysis became entwined with powerful destructive impulses capable of using the Nazi whirlwind to achieve their own ends (Frosh, 2005: 63). Instead, the aim of this investigation is follow in the vein of recent scholarship on the vernacularisation of modern scientific normativity to explore the extent to which ‘sex’ and ‘race’ were normalized to different effects in Hirschfeld’s work.

To date, some of the most influential contributions to debates about the politics of ‘race’, sexuality and history have centred on the temporal paradigms that shape the emergence of these discourses and their transmission. Here scholars examining the origins of concepts of ‘race’ have drawn attention to the complicated investments in, and meanings of, racial thought in the conceptualisation of a Western modernity (Banton, 1998; Bernasconi, 2001) while postcolonial critics such as Anne McClintock have scrutinized the sexualisation of the racial Other and the gendering of these discourses at specific moments in colonial history (McClintock, 1995). The queer postcolonial critic Roderick Ferguson has recently extended this work into a specific consideration of the boundaries of existing histories of sexuality. His concern is with issues of periodisation, as he makes the case that that while Foucault inaugurated ‘the study of sexuality as a historiographic venture bent on identifying hegemonic periodisations of sexuality and then reperiodising sexuality to promote new theorizations of power’, scholars have yet to problematise Foucauldian periodisation itself to gain a sense of ‘how race informs various mutations in the technologies of sex’ (Ferguson, 2007: 116-17). Ferguson’s observations come out of a specific concern with postnationalist American studies that extends the methods of historical materialism and what he calls ‘canonical sociology’ to take full account of how
‘racial, gender, sexual, and class differences obtain their distinction through engagements with normativity’ (Ferguson, 2004: 148). However, while his investigation is directed through a critique of twentieth and twenty-first century American cultural politics, the questions raised by Ferguson’s project also bring into relief why we urgently need to scrutinise the racial legacies that shape modern discipline formations such as sexology. For, as Foucault himself reminds us, it is precisely through the scientific knowledge formations that came out of the enlightenment, that ‘the West first asserted autonomy and sovereignty of its own rationality’ (Foucault, 1978: xi). This is not to say that Foucault himself believed the notion of enlightenment and its knowledges to be a stable one but that he acknowledges their impact on the way in which knowledge is organized and the normative effects that are the result of this new scientification of the ‘human’.

The contingencies of normativity and, especially, heterormativity are a central concern of contemporary gender and sexuality studies, developed from examinations of what Adrienne Rich has called ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980: 631-660) into a linchpin of queer theory (Butler, 1990; Warner, 1993). Within the field of the history of sexuality, these debates are shaped by Georges Canguilhelm’s influential paradigm of a post-enlightenment shift from nature to norm (Canguilhelm, 1978). For Canguilhelm this shift can be dated fairly precisely to the emergence of the bourgeoisie following the French Revolution, when the new ‘normative class had won the power to identify […] the function of social norms, whose content it determined, with the use that that class made of them’ (Canguilhelm, 1978: 151). Canguilhelm, acknowledging the ‘ideological illusion’ inherent in this process, considers the history of scientific normativity a characteristically modern phenomenon, marked by a shift
in vocabulary as a new language of the normal replaces the older language of the
natural. Waltraud Ernst, in her ‘reflections on norms and normativity’ picks up on a
gap in Canguilhem’s theorisation. She points out that the linguistic and conceptual
manifestations that are seen to mark the shift from pre-modern to modern – such as
the one from the ‘natural’ to the ‘normal’ – have not been successfully translated into
everyday discourses where the usage of what is ‘natural’ and what is ‘normal’
remains largely interchangeable to this day (Ernst, 2006: 4). Accordingly, her
investigation turns the focus of attention from discursive disjuncture to its prevailing
conceptual overlaps, in a bid to gain a fresh sense of the historical currencies of ideas
about what is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’.

Ernst’s intervention provides a useful framework for extending existing scholarship
on Hirschfeld’s sexual theorisation specifically to explore his engagements with
nature and norm in relation to ‘race’ as well as ‘sex’. To date critical responses to
Hirschfeld’s work that have taken account of matters if ‘race’ have mostly focused on
how sexology was racialised specifically in terms of the Jewishness of many of its
leading practitioners (Haeberle 1982; Gilman; Zipes). More commonly, analyses have
concentrated on the limits and possibilities of the fact that Hirschfeld is keen to
naturalize sexuality, for instance by claiming that what we would now call sexual
identity and identification are ‘involuntary’ (unfreiwillig) manifestations of nature
(Hirschfeld [1914], 1984: 43). In particular, critics have home in on two key concepts
in Hirschfeld’s sexual theory: his ideas about the existence of a ‘third sex’ (drittes
Geschlecht), and his theorisation of sexuality in terms of a theory of ‘sexual
intermediaries’ (sexuelle Zwischenstufen). Broadly speaking it is fair to say that those
critics who centre their analysis on Hirschfeld’s use of the ‘third sex’ model
foreground his essentialist perspective on sexuality and contest its political effects.

For instance, Gilbert Herdt dismisses what he calls Hirschfeld’s ‘innatist and biological positions’ because for him this kind of essentialism lent itself to being easily exploited ‘by those quintessential biological reductionists, the Nazis’ (Herdt, 1994: 29). In contrast, James Steakley has made the case that it is precisely Hirschfeld’s premise of innate sexual orientation that successfully exposed the fact ‘that the persecution of homosexuals, because it could effect no change, was purely vindictive’ (Steakley, 1999: 184).

Studies built around the theory of ‘sexual intermediaries’ (sexuelle Zwischenstufen) in turn, while acknowledging Hirschfeld’s belief that sexuality originates in nature rather than culture, tend to emphasise the significance of this more nuanced model of infinite sexual variation on modern conceptions of sexuality. Mark Johnson, for example, argues that Hirschfeld importantly challenged essentialist assumptions about the ‘absolute distinction between male and female or homosexual and heterosexual’, and that in so doing he deliberately aimed to ‘normalise difference’ in order to advocate the decriminalization of male homosexuality (Johnson, 2009: 174-175). For Johnson, the limits of Hirschfeld’s radical project are defined not by the theory itself but by the question of who owns the sexological discourse. Comparing sexology and twenty-first century queer anthropology, Johnson argues that while both disciplines are invested in ‘normalising transgression’ in a bid to undo inequalities, their projects inevitably create new hierarchies between those who do and do not have no access to the new scientific ‘truths’ (Johnson, 2009: 168). Johnson usefully aligns the projects of sexology and anthropology in a bid to understand the political stakes of cultural relativism and the conceptualization of ‘difference’ in this context. But his work also
points towards a gap in existing scholarship on sexology when it comes to discussions of ‘race’: the fact that sexologist such as Hirschfeld themselves theorised ‘race’, and racism, as part of their emancipatory homosexual activism.

**Hirschfeld, the Harden trial and the abnormalization of Jewish homosexual sexology**

Hirschfeld’s lifework is closely entwined in the fabric of modern German history, from early debates about German nation formation to the destruction of German sexology during the Nazi reign (Steakley, 1999; Herzer, 2001; Dose, 2004). Despite the fact that he was a secular, assimilated Jew, his own Jewishness nevertheless dominated the reception of his work from the outset. Hirschfeld’s sexological career began in the late 1890s, at a time when public sexuality discourses were dominated by specific concerns with civil rights (Bauer, 2009: 8-14). At the same time, ‘race’ debates within many European states including the German Empire were shaped by a new wave of anti-Semitism and the emergence of the Zionist movement which partly responded to it (Volkov, 2006: 13-32). Hirschfeld’s contribution to this political landscape was distinct. He spearheaded a campaign for the revocation of Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, which criminalised ‘unnatural and illicit behaviour’ [between men] with up to five years in prison and an optional revocation of their civil rights (Fout, 1992: 265). Hirschfeld opposed the legislation by make an argument for the existence of a ‘third sex’ whose being is rooted in nature and hence should not fall under the remit of the law. At least on paper this was a relatively successful venture, as Hirschfeld managed to gain more than 3000 signatures of support on a petition submitted to the German Reichstag in 1899 demanding the abolition of Paragraph 175. Signatories included many famous names such as the psychiatrist Richard von
Krafft-Ebing, the writer Heinrich Mann and the physicist Albert Einstein (Wolff, 1986: 43), suggesting that – within the cultural and scientific spheres at least – Germany at the turn of the century seemed ready to turn its back on a homophobic legislation that denied men who loved men full citizenship. However, that the apparently progressive trajectory of the German ‘homosexual emancipation movement’ (Steakley, 1975) lacked the support of a wider public is made all too clear in the reception of Hirschfeld during the Harden trials of autumn 1907, which constitute the moment when Hirschfeld and sexology came to attention of a wider newspaper readership. The language of Hirschfeld’s reception indicates how wider debates about homosexuality and the state became inflected with specific anti-Semitic sentiments that in turn were linked to the new sexology. Specifically, these discourses show how sexology – through its association with homosexuality as well as Jewishness – was abnormalised as a ‘pseudo-science’ that poses a threat to the nation.

The Harden trials took place a year after a liberal Jewish journalist writing under the pseudonym of Maximillian von Harden had published a series of articles in which he accused members of the Kaiser’s entourage of ‘favouritism’ which according to Harden was rooted in the ‘close romantic friendship’ of many of the courtiers. (Hull, 1983: 109-145. See also Dean, 2004: 116-117). One of the accused men, a certain Kuno von Moltke, sued Harden for defamation for being thus associated with homosexuality. The ins and out of the articles, accusations and the trial make for complex reading, as the motivations and means of those involved are often obscure. For instance, while it is not so difficult to see why Moltke, a married man and known lover of men, would want to distance himself publicly from the crime of homosexuality, Harden’s own overtly anti-homosexual focus seems at odds with the
fact that he publicly aligned himself with Hirschfeld’s campaign for the abolition of Paragraph 175. Indeed, Harden asked Hirschfeld to act as medical expert for his defence when the case came to trial, which, while establishing Hirschfeld as ‘the greatest authority on homosexuality in Europe’ (Wolff, 1986: 71), also led to a huge public backlash against him in the German press.

The attacks against Hirschfeld by the German public bear witness to the extent to which the conflations between sexology and Jewishness centred Hirschfeld himself. Charlotte Wolff has translated some of the most illustrative examples of these responses, which document how Hirschfeld and his science fell prey to a dangerous, increasingly racialised rhetoric that emphasized their threat to the nation. For instance, the liberal Munich newspaper Die Münchener Neuesten Nachrichten declared that ‘Dr Hirschfeld makes pubic propaganda under the cover of science which does nothing but poison our people’; the rightwing paper Germania demanded that ‘we must make an end of people like Dr Hirschfeld’, and leaflets distributed outside Hirschfeld’s home proclaimed ‘Dr Hirschfeld- A Public Danger. The Jews are Our Undoing’ (Wolff, 1986: 73-74).

The tone of the responses testifies to the complex entanglement of anti-sexology sentiments with anti-Semitic thinking, which clearly reached across the political spectrum. Harden’s own testament in court further complicated the picture, as he made use of a vocabulary of homosexual stereotyping which overlapped with the widespread language of degeneration that was also used specifically against Jews (Gilman and Chamberlin, 1985). For while Harden claimed to have been motivated by the wish to expose political rather than sexual corruption, he also, to borrow the
words of Isabel Hull, ‘subscribed to virtually the same stereotypes of homosexual men that everyone else did in the period. [For instance], he repeatedly used the words ‘sickly sweet’ (süsslich), ‘unmanly’, ‘sickly’ (kränklich), ‘weak’ to describe them’ (Hull, 1982: 134). Harden’s description of the ‘sickly’, ‘weak’ and ‘unmanly’ homosexual tapped into a prevailing anti-Semitic rhetoric which had gained fresh currency in the fin-de-siècle degeneration debates that seeped across Europe (Forth, 2004; Gilman, 1990: 168-169; Pick, 1989). Their anti-Semitic undertones in relation to theorisations of sex have been picked up on in particular in relation to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis and its reception (Gilman, 1993; Frosh, 2004). The discourses around sexology add yet another layer to this debate as they focus specifically on the sexuality of sexologists such as Hirschfeld whose own homosexuality, unlike the implicit heterosexuality of Freud, became one of the yardsticks by which the new sexology was abnormalised.

**Discipline and destruction: the birth and death of the Institute of Sexual Sciences**

It is indicative that Hirschfeld himself did neither respond directly to the anti-Semitism, nor did he comment on his own Jewishness, but focused his efforts on the strengthening of the sexual science. For example, the more than one thousand pages of his key study of *Male and Female Homosexuality*, published in 1914, make only one reference that is remotely connected to what the index calls *Judentum* [Jewry], and this is when Hirschfeld writes that contemporary ideas about sexuality and its legislation are a product of the ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’ (Hirschfeld [1914], 1984: 817). However, Hirschfeld responded to the public attacks indirectly with a new series of internationally focused initiatives that were deliberately aimed at strengthening the discipline of sexology. For example, as founding editor, he brought
to life the first journal for sexual science, the *Jahrbuch für Sexuelle Zwischenstufen* [Yearbook for Sexual Intermediaries], which was later edited by Iwan Bloch and Albert Eulenberg. The journal provided a mouthpiece for a diverse band of sex researchers including Freud. Freud distanced himself from Hirschfeld in 1911 after Hirschfeld left the fledgling psychoanalytic movement over a methodological row about the suitability of Hirschfeld’s ‘questionnaire’, a proto-Kinseyan device aimed at recoding the sexual habits of the population. Freud’s private comments on Hirschfeld following the affair in a letter written to Jung on 2 November 1911 are worth mentioning, as they reinforce the deep-rooted homophobic sentiments of the time which here come to the fore in a disciplinary squabble over how to study sex. Freud writes: ‘Magnus Hirschfeld has left our ranks in Berlin. No great loss, he is a flabby, unappetizing fellow, absolutely incapable of learning anything [and suffering from] homosexual touchiness (Freud, 1974: 453-4. See also Bauer, 2009: xxx).’

Hirschfeld’s efforts for sexology paid off in the immediate aftermath of the First World War when the government of the new German Republic, keen to distance itself from its immediate imperial past, ushered in a brief period of cultural and scientific freedom (Steakley, 1999: 188). These political developments brought with them some efforts to redistribute wealth and properties, as the new state sold off a number of aristocratic homes. In a poetic twist of justice, given his entanglement in the affairs of the court of the last German Kaiser, Hirschfeld managed to buy a palatial villa which had formerly belonged to Count Hatzfeld, the former German ambassador to France. In July 1919, he opened the world’s first *Institut für Sexualwissenschaften* [Institute for Sexual Sciences].
The opening of the Institute marks the moment when the formal institution of sexology is complete. Its organisation of research into four sections – sexual biology, sexual pathology, sexual ethnology, and sexual sociology – was conceived as a blueprint for universities aiming to set up their own departments of sexology (Haeberle, 1982). The types of subdisciplines established are in line with a shift in scientific debates about racial theory in the early twentieth-century, where, as Michael Banton has argued, disciplines such as sociology shifted emphasis from the concept of ‘race’ to that of populations (Banton, 1998: 60). Hirschfeld’s sexology – especially the turn to ‘sexual ethnology’ – reveals a similar concern with the mapping of ‘populations’ including in terms of sexual subcultures, behaviour and customs. The Institute left perhaps its greatest mark through a wide range of outreach services including counselling and support for Berlin’s same-sex and transgender communities as well as a radical program of advice and sex education – ‘called the new ethics’ – developed with the feminist activist Helene Stöcker and covering issues such as contraception, marriage guidance and treatment for venereal diseases (Wolff, 1986: 86-90).

During the interwar periods, the institute flourished, providing a home for a diverse and international number of scientists and researchers, as well as cultural commentators, lay people and writers such as, famously, Christopher Isherwood. The fate of the Institute after the Nazis came to power is quickly told: it was raided and ransacked on 6 May 1933 by German students and the SA, who loaded their loot onto open trucks that were four days later driven to Opernplatz were they were set alight, while a smashed up bust of Hirschfeld himself was symbolically burnt at the stake during this first of a series of now infamous Nazi book burnings. Erwin Haeberle
suggests that the Institute’s focus on sex combined with the association of sexology with Jewish practitioners such as Hirschfeld made it a suspect place in the eyes of the wider public from the outset, a fact that helps to explain why it became a focus of Nazi destruction so soon (Haeberle, 1981). Hirschfeld himself was in exile in Switzerland when the Nazis raided the institute. A few days later he relocated to France where he partly witnessed the events in a newsreel in a cinema. He died in his French exile in 1935, aged sixty-seven.

**Racism, homophobia and strategic essentialism**

In light of the destruction of his Institute, it is not difficult to explain what prompted Hirschfeld to turn his attention from sexuality as an object of study to a concern with unravelling the contingencies of what he called ‘racism’. He provides a clear statement of his aims and motivation in the work itself, explaining that it seeks ‘to examine the racial theory which underlies the doctrine of race war’ for the very reason that he himself is ‘numbered among the many thousand who have fallen victim to the practical realization of this theory’ (Hirschfeld, 1938: 35). But *Racism* can tell us more than showing the impact of the Nazi regime on the work of one of Germany’s leading sex researcher. For the study casts some light on Hirschfeld’s own conception of ‘race’ which in turn enhances understanding of the strategic essentialism that informed his sexual politics.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *Racism* was a key work in introducing the term into the English language (*OED*, 2nd ed., s.v. ‘racism’). Its overall aim is to trace a genealogy of modern racial thinking from enlightenment discipline formations to Nazi ideology, which explains why the work could not be published in Germany.
during the 1930s. Specifically, Hirschfeld here critiques the process by which racial thinking is perpetuated historically through modern technologies of knowledge such as the educational system. For instance, he cites the example of how he was taught in school that humanity is divided according to Friedrich Blumenbach’s colour-coded taxonomy into five distinct ‘races’: ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘yellow’ ‘red’ and ‘brown’. The teaching of this classification, according to Hirschfeld, exemplifies the normative process by which scientific speculation is vernacularised as universal ‘truth’. Such ‘truths’ in turn underpin Western assumptions about ‘modern humanity’ that conflate ideas about civilisation (or a perceived lack thereof) and skin colour to make claims for the existence of racial hierarchies which inevitably privilege ‘whites’ and which are more often than not – as in the case of German Nazism – used to further a politics of national expansion and supremacy (Hirschfeld, 1938: 97).

Hirschfeld argues that to tackle the technologies supporting racist thinking, the category of ‘race’ be jettisoned altogether. ‘If it were practicable’, he writes, ‘we should certainly do well to eradicate the use of the word ‘race’ as far as subdivisions of human species are concerned; or, if we do use it in this way, to put it in quote-marks to show that it is questionable.’ In parts, Hirschfeld’s words pick up on contemporary scientific debates which by the 1930s had widely accepted the Darwinian move away from rigid ahistorical racial types to a somewhat more fluid notion of ‘species’ that formed and reformed according to its environment (Banton, 1998).

Hirschfeld is clearly in line with those researchers who argue that ‘difference’ between groups of people should be defined socially. He proposes to replace racial
types with a notion of ‘social mimicry’ (176), a term that describes what according to Hirschfeld is otherwise ‘sometimes called custom or convention, sometimes decency or morality, sometimes esprit the corps or tradition; sometimes routine; sometimes solidarity; while sometimes […] it struts as etiquette, or is boasted of as good form’ (176). However, this proto-constructivist stance, which anticipates later postcolonial debates about intersectionality, is considerably complicated when Hirschfeld adds consideration of the sexual to the racial. For here he proclaims that ‘the uniform aspect of homosexuality in all races and under all skies has been for me a convincing proof of its biological causation. In this matter, beyond question, the sexual type conquers the racial type’ (162). Hirschfeld, then, while rejecting the biology of ‘race’, stakes a claim for the biology of sexuality, a phenomenon that according to him supersedes any social, cultural or geographical contingencies.

Why, if Hirschfeld sees ‘race’ to be a construct, is he so keen to naturalise sexuality? The apparent contradiction is at least partly resolved when Hirschfeld turns to an examination of what we would now call homophobia where he deploys the ‘sexual type’ as a form of strategic essentialism aimed at challenging both heteronormative assumptions about sexuality and at tackling racist thought. Racism includes what within sexological literature is a rare mention of ‘heterosexuality’, an example of a ‘norm’ that is only invented after the conceptualisation of the ‘abnormal’ (Canguilhem, 1978: 149), and which remained largely untheorised by sexologists. ‘Heterosexuals’, Hirschfeld explains,

regard themselves as ‘normal’ because they are in the majority, and [they] have an instinctive dislike for homosexuals and their ways – a dislike that is fostered by the suggestive influence of education – hypocritically including to
pretend that homosexual practices cannot have arisen spontaneously in their own happy land and among their own fortunately endowed ‘race’. (Hirschfeld, 1938: 150-151)

Hirschfeld’s evocation of the normative strategies of a heterosexual ‘majority’ touches on the modern technologies of sex which produce what Canguilhelm would call the ‘ideological illusion’ of their validity (Canguilhelm, 1978: 151). Specifically, Hirschfeld’s linkage of sexuality and ‘race’ – and what we would now call homophobia and racism – expose the problematic politics of a system of education that fosters the idea that historically-contingent beliefs are scientific ‘truths’. Clearly, Hirschfeld here employs the notion of a ‘universal homosexual’ as a form of strategic essentialism, used to challenge the double-bind of ‘normal heterosexual versus abnormal homosexual’, as well as the idea of a distinct ‘racial type’ that may be more or less prone to the abnormal.

**Conclusion**

John Solomos, in his study of ‘race’ and racism, has defined racism ‘in the sense that it is used to cover those ideologies and social processes which discriminate against others on the basis of their putatively different racial membership. There is little to be gained from seeing racism merely as a signifier for ideas of biological or cultural superiority’, he argues, ‘since it has become clear in recent years that the focus attributed to biological inferiority is being replaced in contemporary forms of racist discourse by a concern with culture and ethnicity as historically fixed categories’ (Solomos, 1993: 9). The reception of Hirschfeld’s work and his own writings on ‘race’ indicate a longer standing investment in the categorisation of ‘race’ in relation to categories of both biology and culture. The reception of his sexological efforts in
the first three decades of the twentieth century makes tangible some of the complex and prevailing entanglements between racial and sexual discourses. They indicate that here the conflations of nature and norm are as revealing as the shift from nature to norm that is seen to characterise the modern period. Hirschfeld’s own theorisation of ‘sex’ and ‘race’, which critiques the systematic transmission of racialised knowledges, reinforces that if we want to understand more fully the ways in which racial thinking is perpetuated, we need to pay attention to the strategic employment of norms by theorists such Hirschfeld whose strategy it was to dismantle racist ideas by opposing a natural sexualized type to the contingencies of the racialised type. It is here, as this article has aimed to show, in considerations of nature alongside norm that we gain a sense of the institution of normativity through shared discourses about the interlinkedness of sexuality and ‘race’ that are simultaneously nation-specific and upholding the wider post-Enlightenment project of a privileged Western modernity.

Works Cited


Kushner, T. (1990). Beyond the pale? British reactions to Nazi Anti-Semitism, 1933-


This is taken from the English translation of the Freud-Jung correspondence by Ralph Mannheim and R.F.C. Hull, which was published in 1974. The 1994 edition of the correspondence, produced by the same team who completed the 1974 edition, silently excludes this and other homophobic remarks made by Freud.