



Third Sex

by J. Edgar Bauer

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The relative popularity of the term "third sex" is closely connected to its use by some of the most prominent representatives of the early homosexual rights movement in Germany.

Both Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld used the term "third sex" in their writings and traced its origins back to Plato's *Symposium*. In this dialogue, Aristophanes propounds a mythological explanation of heteroerotic and homoerotic attraction in connection with the three primordial sexes of mankind: male-male, male-female, and female-female.

According to this myth, present-day humans are halves of ancestral composite individuals who belonged to one of these three sexes, whom Zeus punished because of their insolence by dividing them in two. Consequently, erotic love is basically an attempt of these halves to recover their primordial nature by reuniting with their lost halves. While the primordial male-female individuals gave rise to men and women who are attracted to each other, the male-male and female-female individuals account for the existence of people who are attracted to members of their own sex.

Two main traits of the myth resonate with Ulrichs and Hirschfeld: its alternative scheme of sexual distribution and the egalitarian (or "natural") explanation of both heterosexual and homosexual love.

Hirschfeld, who during his stay in India was acclaimed as the "the modern Vatsayana of the West," alluding to the author of the *Kamasutra*, relates, on several occasions, his own concept of "third sex" to the ancient Sanskrit concept of a third sexual nature.

Although "third sex" hardly plays any role in post-modern discourse, recently coined concepts such as "n-sex," "meta-sex," "next sex," or "no-sex" can be considered variations on the "third sex," inasmuch as they also convey the idea of a sexual distribution beyond traditional sexual binaries.

The Third Sex in Late Nineteenth-Century Literature

In the nineteenth century, the term "third sex" covered a broader semantic field than its present-day usage. Thus, at times, it was employed in literary texts to describe non-conventional or subversive women who, without being lesbians, were capable of dealing lucidly with their own sexual complexities and of questioning the social roles females were expected to fulfill.

In 1835, the French Romantic poet and novelist Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) published *Mademoiselle de*



The *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen* included these images of sexual types in 1903: The masculine type (top), the Urning type (center), and the feminine type (above). According to Magnus Hirschfeld, the *Jahrbuch's* publisher, such sexual distinctions represent points on a continuum rather than distinct categories. Archiv für Sexualwissenschaft, Berlin.

Maupin, whose preface constitutes one of the earliest manifestos of the aesthetics of *l'art pour l'art* and announces the worldview later propounded by Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde. The heroine of the novel, with a penchant for "impossible things," fantasizes about alternating between the two sexes in order to satisfy her "double nature." She declares that, in fact, neither of the two sexes is her own. Rather, she is "of a separate third sex that does not yet have a name."

Although she yearns for a male lover and a female friend, her self-descriptions clearly exclude the possibility of homosexuality, bisexuality, or biological hermaphroditism. The namelessness of her "sex" is not related to an unavowable sexual orientation, but to the unavailability of an adequate language to articulate her own sex and gender awareness: "I have the body and soul of a woman, the spirit and the force of a man."

Without implying the sexual transgressiveness of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs' concept of a female soul confined in a male body (or vice versa), or of John Henry Mackay's "nameless love," Maupin's self-descriptions as a member of a "third sex" intends both to expose and disrupt the gender ideology that hinders "the true happiness . . . of being everything that one can possibly be."

In 1899, Ernst Ludwig von Wolzogen (1855-1934), a German novelist, published *Das dritte Geschlecht* (The Third Sex), in which one of the protagonists contemptuously depicts the "third sex" as the new women who do not understand themselves as "sexual entities" with clear-cut duties and prerogatives, but just as "fellow human beings." By rejecting marriage and demanding equal rights for both sexes, the new women reveal themselves as not being truly women, but "neuters" with external female characteristics accompanied by a crippled male psyche.

Wolzogen's portrayal of feminist activists as a "third sex" echoes, to a certain extent, Gautier's depiction of his subversive dandiacal heroine, while adding a note of sarcastic exaggeration that reflects the author's awareness of growing feminist self-empowerment.

Only after the turn of the century, in 1901, was the term "third sex" used in an explicitly lesbian context, in Minna Wettstein-Adelt's novel *Sind es Frauen? Roman über das dritte Geschlecht* [Are They Women? A Novel about the Third Sex], published under the pseudonym Aimée Duc. The novel adopts the general "Uranian" understanding of the term to which Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld, Wettstein-Adelt's contemporary, gave theoretical contours.

Earlier, but referring to male same-sex sexual desires, the understanding of "third sex" as homosexuals was announced in literature by Honoré de Balzac's (1799-1850) novel *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* [Splendors and Miseries of Courtesans], published in four volumes between 1838 and 1847, as part of *Scènes de la vie parisienne* in the *Comédie humaine*.

The "Third Sex" as Homosexuality

In a letter of September 22, 1862 addressed to his sister, German scholar Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895) used the term "third sex" to refer to homosexuals. He explains that people like him are not men in the common sense of the word, since there is a "decidedly female element" in them. Although they have a male body, they are "spiritually female" in correspondence to the "direction of their sexual love." Insisting on the inborn and natural character of such a sexual disposition, Ulrichs redefines sexuality within a triadic scope of sexual possibilities and concludes: "We constitute a third sex."

Two years later, under the pseudonym Numa Numantius, Ulrichs published the first of a series of twelve booklets on "the riddle" of male same-sex love under the title *Vindex. Sozial-juristische Studien über mann männliche Geschlechtsliebe* [Social-legal Studies on Sexual Love between Men]. In this treatise, Ulrichs wrote: "We Uranians constitute a special sexual class of people, comparable to hermaphrodites, a sex of its own, coordinate as a third sex with that of men and that of women."

True to the biographical motivation of his scientific pursuits, Ulrichs took at first a male view of the "third sex." His point of departure was the "Uranian," whom he defined as "a female soul trapped in a male body" and distinguished from the normal man, which he termed "Dioning." He later examined female Uranism, that is, women with a masculine love-drive, and concluded that both Uranisms are integral parts of a separate, third sexual class.

Early British Sexual Discourse

The term "third sex" was not used widely by the representatives of the early homosexual rights movement in Britain, who generally preferred more technical concepts for designating individuals attracted to their own sex.

In his "Terminal Essay" (1886) accompanying his translation of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, Sir Richard Burton (1821-1890), the foremost Orientalist of his age, included a vast account of pederasty without making any reference to the third sex. Burton's careful avoidance of the concept is all the more significant if one considers that the essay elaborates extensively on an alleged "Sotadic Zone" (located between north latitudes 43° and 30°), where "there is a blending of the masculine and feminine temperaments, a crisis which elsewhere occurs only sporadically"; and discusses Plato's mythical account of the origins of same-sex love.

A similar tendency can be observed in the case of John Addington Symonds (1840-1893). In his influential book *Studies in Sexual Inversion*, consisting of the treatises *A Study in Greek Ethics* (1883) and *A Study in Modern Ethics* (1891), Symonds uses several synonyms for "sexual inversion," but mentions the "third sex" only briefly in references to other authors. In the first *Study*, Symonds explains that Plato's "theory of sexual differentiation" includes "three sexes" and then describes the "third (hermaphrodite or lunar) sex"; in the second *Study*, he omits any mention of "three sexes" himself, but quotes the phrase in a passage taken from Ulrichs.

Although Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) was acquainted with the non-technical, but relevant use of the term "third sex" in the writings of Magnus Hirschfeld and other German scholars, he does not even mention the concept in the course of his elucidations on same-sex terminology that introduce the third, revised edition of his famous treatise *Sexual Inversion* (1915).

In a seminal study of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs published under the title "An Unknown People" (1897) and subsequently incorporated as the second chapter of *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), Edward Carpenter (1844-1929) depicts the "Uranian type" as a "class of people" born "as it were on the dividing line between the sexes" and destined to become their "reconcilers and interpreters." However, he fails to mention that this "large class" was designated the "third sex" by Ulrichs.

Hirschfeld and the Fictionality of the Third Sex

Magnus Hirschfeld, who used the term for the first time in 1899, made the concept "third sex" popular in the twentieth century. Since "third sex"--like the term *Urning* ["Uranian"]-- has no moral or medical implications, it has been widely used in self-descriptive contexts.

With "third sex," Hirschfeld designated a whole range of intermediate forms of sexuality that could not be readily classified using the male/female scheme. Although Hirschfeld did not employ the term very often, he conceded that its advantage over "homosexuality" consisted in the fact that it does not necessarily connote sexual acts. This notwithstanding, Hirschfeld underscored that he did not use the term in his scientific publications, where he preferred to use either "sexual intermediaries" or "sexual transitions."

Tellingly, the term appears unqualified only in two titles of the more than 500 items Hirschfeld published in

his lifetime: *Was soll das Volk vom dritten Geschlecht wissen? Eine Aufklärungsschrift über gleichgeschlechtlich (homosexuell) empfindende Menschen* [What Should People Know about the Third Sex? An Educational Pamphlet on Same-sex (homosexual) Oriented People] (1902) and *Berlins drittes Geschlecht* [Berlin's Third Sex] (1904). In the title of a much later publication, *Das angeblich dritte Geschlecht des Menschen. Eine Erwiderung [auf G. Fritsch]* (1919) [The Alleged Third Sex of Human Beings. A Reply to G. Fritsch] (1919), Hirschfeld suggests an even more cautious usage of the term.

Hirschfeld was well aware that creating a third sexual category meant the addition of a further "fiction" to the equally fictional categories of man and woman. A close reading of his texts shows that his fictional postulation of the "third sex" never led Hirschfeld to revoke the fundamental insight granted by his doctrine of sexual intermediaries, which asserted the intersexual condition of all human beings.

As Hirschfeld wrote in a text published in 1905, strictly speaking, there are no men and women, but only human beings who are "to a large extent male or to a large extent female." In his view, then, the difference between the "sexes" is not qualitative, but merely quantitative, concerning only the ratio of male and female components in an individual.

With the reference to the "third sex" liable to misunderstandings, Hirschfeld stressed that the term was not meant as "something complete and closed in itself," but as an "indispensable makeshift" introduced in the discussion of sexual difference in order to overcome the "extremely superficial scheme of classification in man and woman."

Hirschfeld's concept of the "third sex" also functioned as a provisional identificatory category for those deprived of their sexual rights in a society organized according to the patterns of sexual binarism. Thus, in spite of its fictionality and tentativeness, "third sex" connects Hirschfeld's basic theoretical insights with his libertarian activism on behalf of the oppressed.

John Henry Mackay's Critique

Hirschfeld's contentions regarding the third sex did not remain uncontested. Indeed, the issue became a major matter of dispute between the two main factions within the sexual emancipation movement in Germany, the group centered around Hirschfeld's Scientific-humanitarian Committee and another group, *Die Gemeinschaft der Eigenen* [The Community of the Self-Owners], a pederastic-oriented organization with right-wing nationalistic proclivities.

Although John Henry Mackay himself sustained liberal views on politics and never became an official member of "Die Eigenen," he exerted on the group a considerable influence because of his philosophical anarchism, and his collection of homoerotic texts, *Die Buecher der namenlosen Liebe* [The Books of the Nameless Love], which Mackay published under the pseudonym of "Sagitta" between 1906 and 1926.

Characteristically, Mackay/Sagitta derided in *Fenny Skaller*, the third of the Books of Nameless Love, the new sexual type described by some "physicians" as "a new sex, a third sex in-between the other two." Although Hirschfeld is not mentioned explicitly in the passage, it is clear that he, being a physician and the most prominent activist on behalf of the "third sex," was the primary target of Mackay's critique.

From Mackay's perspective, the pursuits of the "physicians" were part of an ongoing cultural process designed to deny the specificity of pederastic "nameless love" by creating a third category that is distinct from "male" and "female," but that does not allow for internal differentiation. Mackay was particularly keen on distinguishing the "nameless love" from effeminate forms of homosexuality that he associated with Hirschfeld and his circle.

Sigmund Freud and the Third Sex

One of Sigmund Freud's basic contentions with regard to sexuality is that the phenomenon of homosexuality does not warrant the assumption of a sex distinct from that of males and females. In an addendum of 1915 to *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* [Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality] (1905), Freud stated that psychoanalytical research opposes categorically the attempt to consider homosexuals as a separate group of people on account of their specific sexual disposition.

Five years earlier, in *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci* ["Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood"] (1910), Freud had observed critically that homosexual men were pleased to be portrayed by "their theoretical spokespersons" as "a separate sexual variety, as sexual intermediaries, as a 'third sex.'" In a very similar formulation in 1916, Freud mentioned that male and female homosexuals are depicted by their "scientific spokespersons" as a "special variety of the human species, [as] a 'third sex.'"

Despite the plural form, when Freud mentions the theoretical or scientific spokespersons of homosexuals, he means first and foremost Magnus Hirschfeld, the most prominent spokesman of the homosexual rights movement at the time. With his critique, however, Freud reveals a fundamental misapprehension of the actual tenets at stake in Hirschfeld's claims. Besides ignoring the fact that Hirschfeld used the term only in non-scientific contexts, Freud also ignores Hirschfeld's tentativeness regarding the "third sex," as well as the actual import of his fundamental teachings.

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