

# The Market of Desire

## On the Emergence of a Consensual-Consumerist Morality in the 20th Century<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *At the beginning of the 20th century, sexology increasingly distinguished between sex and reproduction. At the same time, desire was assigned a crucial function for human sexuality, and the biopolitical criterion of reproduction was replaced by the ethical principle of consensus. A »new morality« emerged. This turned pathologies into varieties into identities. While this development can definitely be understood as a certain liberation from the gender roles of the 19th century, it also tied sexuality and gender to the conditions of a liberal capitalist achieving and consumer society.*

**Keywords:** *Consumerism; Consensual; »New Morality«; Varieties; Sex Reform*

### Introduction

Since the end of the 19th century, when sexology emerged from sexual pathology, one can speak of a consumerist sex economy, which, however, tended to spread primarily in the metropolises of liberal capitalist societies. Its hallmark is a sexual and gender variety in which desire and its satisfaction are the real driving forces. In the 1920s, this was advertised as a »new morality«, which was based on a new understanding of a flexible body regulated by hormones, and which promised the perfectly reasonable fulfillment of individual desire. But

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1 The central ideas of this contribution can also be found in this German-language version: Stoff 2023.

such right to gratification and satisfaction, which was declared in terms of sexual ethics, was full of conflict and by no means absolutely distanced from the ideal of continuous monogamy.

In the following, the genealogy of consumerist sexuality, which must also be understood as an alignment to consensual sexual relationships, will be presented in more detail. Individualized pleasure corresponds to the development of liberal capitalism and at the same time materializes in the functions of the hormonally regulated body. With the separation of reproduction and sex as well as the flexibilization of the sexual body, pathologies in the sexological discourse turned into anomalies and finally into varieties. In this sex-economic logic, pleasure satisfaction corresponds to the behavior of consumers (»consumer choices«). As early as the 1920s, a new morality of consecutive polygamy was proclaimed, which is realized in the subjectification of consumerist bodies freed from the burdens of 19th century's gender roles.

### The new morality of enjoying life

The sex reform debate of the early 20th century claimed to base a »new sex morality« on the evidence of a scientifically evaluated natural drive. This was in opposition to what was classified as unscientific »old sex morality« primarily concerned with protecting marital procreation. According to this, sexuality had to be unfree and alienated in bourgeois society, precisely because it contradicted the latest findings in sexology, which were gained in the context of sex hormone research. Bourgeois sexuality practiced in the 19th century, as can be summarized from the contributions to the discussion, such as those put forward within the framework of the World League for Sexual Reform, was itself unscientific, and therefore unnatural, since it did not correspond to the hormonal economy of the sexual body (Haire 1930).

The idea that sexuality itself follows an economic logic was already discussed at the time, for example by Antonio Gramsci and Wilhelm Reich. In particular, the connection between class society and sexual morality was debated, and a fundamental contrast between the »full satisfaction of natural needs« (Reich 1945: 24) and an ascetic and conservative sexual morality was stated. Around sixty years later, the historian Lawrence Birken pointed out that at the long turn from the 19th to the 20th century, a consumerist ideology was established both in marginalist or neoclassical economic theory and in sexological discourse (Birken 1988). After that, consumption no longer meant covering needs, but was tied to desires that could never be completely satisfied, and to

varied enjoyment of life, as Hermann Heinrich Gossen, a pioneer of neo-classical theory, already pointed out in the mid-19th century: »People want to enjoy their lives and make it their purpose in life to increase their enjoyment of life to the highest possible level« (Gossen 1854: 1).<sup>2</sup> According to Birken, this resulted in an egalitarian ideology of consumers united under the single function of desire (Birken 1988: 132). Sexuality as a biological criterion, Regenia Gagnier deepened this thesis, meant a »pleasure liberated from reproduction«. As much as this consumerist conviction spread as a »new morality«, it remained bound to the conditions of a liberal capitalist industrial society (Gagnier 2000: 236).<sup>3</sup>

As early as the late 19th century a »market of pleasures« emerged, in which, in principle, anything could become an object of desire. Finally, in the 20th century, hormone-driven bodies consumed other bodies, sensations and things. At the same time, desire was understood as a constant renewal and renewed increase of short-term, but ideally synchronized, orgasmic satisfactions.<sup>4</sup> One could therefore speak of hormonally regulated and desiring bodies, which are characterized by variability and adaptability and are constantly renewed in sexual consumption: the consuming body is driven by a mechanism of constant revitalization by desire. While the abolition of monogamous, heterogenital and normative sexuality is inherent in this consumerist sexuality as an essential tendency, it is at the same time still tied to the conditions of the achieving and consumer society. A critique that focuses on this last point then inevitably comes to the conclusion that even a consensual consumerist sexuality does not escape socio-economic formats and currently functions as a significant driver of neoliberal ways of life. It is not only subject to the market laws of commodity society and the rules of class society, but also produces economically and sexually competing subjects. The individualization of lust then allowed only partial collectivization, as had been tried out since the end of the 19th century in bohemian circles and communes, in open relationships and swinger clubs, as well as in gay and lesbian bars. The following is therefore primarily about the elaboration of those »lines of flight«, to introduce a term used by Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze 1997), that have been trying to realign the reality of sex in liberal capitalism for over a hundred years through the discursivization and materialization of both gender and sexualities.

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2 My translation.

3 Cf. Ford/Keates/Pulham; Tratner 2015.

4 Cf. Jagose 2013; Stoff 2002.

## 1. Consumerist narratives

It is no longer a particularly original idea to trace body concepts back to economic thinking and to work out the transfer of metaphors between technical and physiological areas of knowledge. In particular, the historian Anson Rabinbach showed in his classic *The Human Motor* that the theory of thermodynamics guided medical ideas about metabolism in the 19th century. Since the 1840s, steam and body machines appeared to be functionally identical. The performance-oriented body was constituted by the thermodynamic discourse. For Rabinbach, these concepts of the body were also the foundations of modernity (Rabinbach 1990). This was most clearly shown in the famous depictions by Fritz Kahn from the 1920s, which presented the internal environment of the body as an industrial system.<sup>5</sup> Historian Roman Rossfeld refers to the use of corresponding medical metaphors in economics, so that one can speak of a medical-economic apparatus just as easily (Rossfeld 2016). The technically modeled body, the human machine, functions economically and the economy, the regulated body of society, is based on medical concepts. It is of great importance that these are not just discourses, but rather models with a high application orientation. Since then, body and economy have not only been explained by the binary key concepts of »deficiency« and »performance« – without which hormone research in particular would have been unthinkable – but also made specifically functional, adaptable and optimizable.<sup>6</sup> As productive as these bodies could now be designed, they were also determined by the consumerist structure of desire that was primarily established in sexological discourse.

In 1931, German philosopher Karl Jaspers observed a leveling of the ages, which was tantamount to a functionalizing de-humanization of people in modern achieving and consumer societies: »Youth as the existence of the highest vital productivity and the erotic joy in life is the desired type of life in general. Where humans count only as a function, they must be young; when it is no longer so, they will create the appearance of youth.« (Jaspers 1931: 46–47).<sup>7</sup> The fit, flexible and powerful, and therefore youthful and eroticized body in search of achievement and happiness became the new ideal.<sup>8</sup> It was precisely

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5 Cf. Sappol 2017.

6 Cf. Stoff 2012: 11–19.

7 My translation.

8 Cf. Martschukat 2021; Graf 2013.

a body that can be constantly optimized and improved that was dependent on the newly developed functions and agents in its inner environment. A functional human body and consumerist desire are therefore very closely linked. And both – functionality and desire – can be realized through the effectiveness of biochemical agents in the organism. At the same time, such corporeal plasticity also opened up and legitimized the potential of much more diverse life (and sex) practices. This is exactly what was called the »new morality« in the 1920s.

In the historiographical analysis, the change in the structure of capitalist societies, which is realized in the convergence of functionality and desire, has been presented since the late 1980s with the help of a »consumerist narrative« (Bänziger 2015: 12). According to this, an ideology of consumerism, a consumerist discourse and consumer-oriented ways of subjectivation have been established since the last third of the 19th century as the American model of an egalitarian and democratic society in which performance, success and the pursuit of happiness are directly related (Nolan 1994: 30–57). This »consumerist narrative« has also been credited with depicting a conflict between an »old« and a »new« morality in the first third of the 20th century. Another and related turning point was the separation of reproduction and sex drive. Since then, in the history of the body and sexuality, it has been possible to talk about gender and desire without constantly being referred back to the primacy of reproduction (even if »reproduction« is still used as a central evolutionary-biological argument against the dissolution of the binary sex and gender model). In consumer societies, as Birken explains, what was established as pathology and moral illness is transformed with inner necessity into varieties, into consumer offers and practices: »The marginalist revolution made consumption – the satisfaction of idiosyncratic desire – the end of all human activity and thus immune from moral scrutiny« (Birken 1988: 31). In the following, it will be briefly shown how these consumerist discourses materialized and yet remained bound to social modes of production. However, »pathologies« were not only transformed into »varieties«; at the same time, the dimorphic sex model, the great anatomical and physiological project of the 19th century, was permanently problematized. Consumerism seemed to liberate people from the shackles of the »old morality« in liberal capitalism. But as Herbert Marcuse put it succinctly, the so-called consumer economy also created »a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form« (Marcuse 1969: 11). The establishment of a sexual morality that tends to be free of dimorphism, in which the main drive of sexual practices is not reproduction but

the free-floating desire of consumers, would then necessarily always be tied to the prevailing economy and form of society.

### Pathologies, anomalies, varieties

The fact that sexual consumerism took place with the transformation of pathologies first into anomalies and then into varieties can be seen well in Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis*, which has appeared in numerous revised editions since 1886.<sup>9</sup> In this work, which records an almost endless list of sexual »anomalies« and yet does not draft an explicit norm, a »market of desires« was created at the same time. As the compilation subverted the classification, the pathological and anomalous separated itself from the psychiatric discourse and became an identity-proposition. The woman-loving women in Hedwig Maria Mina Adelt's 1901 novel *Sind es Frauen?*, published under the pseudonym Aimée Duc, called themselves »Krafft-Ebingsche« (Duc 1976). Since Krafft-Ebing listed a blacklist of justiciable forms of desire and practices in his main catalog of lusts, which has hardly any moral signification, this sex-pathological work also always stipulates that the pathologies and anomalies, if they took place consensually, turned into varieties of sex practices (Krafft-Ebing 1894). Using the principle of consensual, the varieties could be distinguished from the pathologies. Consensus, a moral imperative, replaced reproduction, a population-political and evolutionary-biological dogma, as the main criterion of accepted sexuality. Pleasure then lurks everywhere and can relate to any object, body, sensation. Desires float freely and are not tied to reproduction. They can attach themselves to all bodies, body parts, all things, all colors and smells. Krafft-Ebing popularized the already existing concept of »erogenous zones« and named the list of fetishes that every porn site can still refer to today. The specification and individualization he undertook constituted a rich supply, an overwhelming repertoire of pleasures, short satisfactions and new stimuli, a consumerist order.<sup>10</sup> »Polymorphic perversity,« as Sigmund Freud later categorized it as childish sexuality, only to force it into a developmental scheme leading to adult coitus and the tiring fit of penis and vagina, in Krafft-Ebing's volume reads as a rampant growth of desire not tied to an infantile phase of development. Such consuming bodies,

9 Cf. Stoff 2016.

10 Cf. Terry 1995.

free from rationality and purpose, naturally seek quick satisfaction, but are subject to the sociocultural commandment of the consensual.

With the devaluation of coitus, which such consumerist sexual diversity inevitably provokes, the emerging sexology also changed the sex and gender order. In Krafft-Ebing's writings, the primacy of procreation, the control of »cultivated people« over their instincts, and the dogma of civilization and higher development still existed and disappeared at the same time. In particular, »contrary sexuality« or »homosexuality« was declared to be a pathological hereditary phenomenon of degeneration, but at the same time it was assigned as just an inverted form of »heterosexuality«, which was conceptualized in the same course. Around 1900, the thesis that homosexuality is a perversion because it does not serve »natural« sexual satisfaction for the purpose of procreation was already obsolete.<sup>11</sup> In the course of the 20th century, the variations of pleasure were basically only differentiated by their heterosexual or homosexual orientation. The »contrary sexuality« was then only a different kind of choice of a sexual object, which did not have to be understood as an anomaly. After all, »contrary sexuals« and »normal heterosexuals« had the same character traits, the same virtues and vices. There are, concluded the psychiatrist and criminologist Paul Näcke, »homo- or heterosexual fetishists, sadists, masochists, exhibitionists etc.« (Näcke 1913: 328).<sup>12</sup> However, as Michel Foucault pointed out in particular, this consumerist sexual theory was in competition with a constitutional-biological orientation that created a homosexual »species« that was fundamentally different from the heterosexual type (Foucault 1976: 43). The classification and specification that had led both to the establishment of psychiatric sexual pathology and to the differentiation of biological sexology produced new ways of existence and at the same time fixed the affected groups on them. This inner contradiction was particularly evident in the work of sexologist and sex reformer Magnus Hirschfeld. His concept of »sexual intermediate stages«, the gradual mixture of »male« and »female« characteristics in all people, can be read as a particularly concise formulation of consumerist discourse. Likewise, the sexual reformer also defined homosexuality as an »absolutely endogenous property, based exclusively on the innate constitution, inseparably and irrevocably linked to the individuality of a person« (Hirschfeld 1914: 325).<sup>13</sup>

11 Cf. Krafft-Ebing 1901.

12 My translation.

13 My translation.

For Hirschfeld it was decisive in the legal battle against § 175, which criminalized homosexual acts by men, that sexuality was defined as a congenital natural drive that required at least partial satisfaction if the »body-psycho organism« did not become disordered (Hirschfeld 1930: 3). After that, there always existed a medically justified right to love; consumerism and biology were inextricably linked. When Herbert Marcuse explained his use of the term »biological« almost forty years later in such a way that he was concerned with characterizing the process and the dimension »in which inclinations, behavior patterns, and aspirations become vital needs which, if not satisfied, would cause dysfunction of the organism«, he followed the program that had been developed around 1900 (Marcuse 1969: 10). Hirschfeld's statement that this natural drive is not aimed at reproduction but at pleasure satisfaction allowed the simultaneous individualization of desire and socialization of reproduction (Hirschfeld 1926: 60). As Atina Grossmann in particular has shown, the accompanying co-existence of »sexual liberation« and eugenics is a special feature of sex reform in the early 20th century (Grossmann 1995).

## Consumer Choices

From the point of view of the consumer there is only the satisfaction or non-satisfaction of their individual desires (Birken 1988: 30–35). According to this neoclassical economic doctrine of the late 19th century, society consists of sovereign, desiring, competing and idiosyncratic subjects. Birken also found exactly this conviction in the sexological texts of this time: Around 1900 the productivist »male-female ideology« of the 18th and 19th centuries, which was tied to the ideal of the possessing and productive man, was followed by an egalitarian and genderless consumerism. All individuals are united under the one function of desire; the wishes of the consumers, the »consumer choices« are always decisive. Neoclassical theory reduced the function of initial production, sexology the role of heterogenital reproduction (Birken 1988: 7–8, 41–42, 132).

However, a mere theory could hardly have stabilized a socially widely practiced sexual consumption. This required the materializing activation and regulation of »consumerist bodies« through the internal secretion of sex hormones, those powerful agents that are made responsible for the flexibility and plasticity of the body. Hormones are the product of experimental systems and testing procedures, in which they prove their competence by correcting specific deficiencies. In animal experiments, for example, the consequences of castration



can be remedied, at least in the short term, by grafting testicles and ovaries. Finally, since corresponding effects understood as »masculinization« or »feminization« could also be caused with substances obtained from urine, for example, »male« and »female« sex hormones were successively presented in their pure form.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore significant that the mutability of age, gender and sexuality that was lamented at the beginning of the 20th century also had to be attributed to the effects of sex hormones. The economy of the physio- or biotechnical body regulated by active substances corresponded to the consumerist sex discourse.

When the historian Ben Barker-Benfield presented the 19th-century pre-hormonal concepts of sexuality as »spermatic economy«, he was emphasizing the importance in medical discourse of preserving »male energy« (Barker-Benfield 1972). In the first three decades of the 20th century, this conviction clearly lost its scientific and social significance.<sup>15</sup> Around 1920, the devaluation of semen in favor of sex hormones received scientific evidence. The Prague histologist and embryologist Alfred Kohn was appalled to learn that science was in the midst of a remarkable change in its views on the gonads. Certain recent authors claimed that the generative part of the testicles had been overestimated. This would remain important for reproduction, but all other effects that determine the somatic and psychological sex character would be triggered by hormone-producing »intermediate cells«. The more intermediate cells, the more pronounced the sexual character, Kohn summed up. This led to the curious conclusion that those individuals whose testicles contained only intermediate cells and no seminiferous tubules appeared to be the most male (Kohn 1920: 95).<sup>16</sup> This clearly spelled out the thoroughly scandalous separation of reproduction and sex drive. While reproduction was entrusted to genetics and eugenics by the thesis of germplasm continuity, sex and sexuality could also be independently explained in terms of the action of the internal secretion of sex hormones produced in the interstitial cells. In principle, this also applied to the female hormone body, which, however, became the object of reproductive medicine experiments and practices at the same time.<sup>17</sup>

Kohn had directed his scientific polemic against the Viennese physiologist Eugen Steinach, whose spectacular rejuvenation experiments around 1920

14 Cf. Oudshoorn 1994.

15 Cf. Bennett 1999.

16 My translation.

17 Cf. Stoff 2012: 232–253.

were based on sterilization stimulating the production of interstitial cells in men at the expense of sperm cells.<sup>18</sup> Above all, however, Steinach assumed that the hormonal effect of the gonads was sex-specific and caused both the separation of the sexes and the emergence of sex characters. His experiments with testicular or ovarian transplants seemed to make it possible to »arbitrarily change the sexual character of the growing individual in rodents« (Steinach 1912: 77).<sup>19</sup> Through the simultaneous grafting of testicles and ovaries in a previously castrated animal, hermaphroditic-homosexual laboratory animals could even be surgically produced. Steinach concludes, that it was possible to experimentally produce a whole scale of somatic, functional, and psychological sex characters (Steinach 1920: 558, 562).

Steinach's experiments were based on Magnus Hirschfeld's intermediate theory of the mixture of »male« and »female« proportions, which again was also modified by these experimentations. The degree of the mixture, arranged within the continuum between the ideals »absolute man« and »absolute woman«, determines the specific variety. The tendency towards the dissolution of the binary sex and gender order was inherent in the theory of intermediate levels, when Hirschfeld defined »man« and »woman« as »constructed abstractions« (Hirschfeld 1914: 357).<sup>20</sup> On the basis of the universalization of the sex drive and the experimental concept of arbitrarily produced mixed forms, the theory of intermediate stages was successively emancipated from dimorphism in the 1920s: According to the »law of unlimited diversity of sexual constitution«, as stated, there are exclusively transitions, a »complete series of individual cases« (Hirschfeld 1926: 6).<sup>21</sup> The new biological fact which was thus introduced claimed the existence and producibility of an almost infinite variety of sex types. In this, as Jürgen Link called it, change from a »discontinuous polarity of the sexes to a continuous gender mix« non-binary sexes were able to gain their biological legitimacy (Link 1997: 373–377). Therefore, the thesis of the absolute alterity of the sexes as a rigid, boundary-drawing strategy was only tenable at the price of being unscientific. The »sex-and gender-mix-model« was linked to the development of endocrinological research, which required the isolation of the biologically active substance. It was only after the sex hormones had been isolated in pure form around

18 Cf. Stoff 2004; Sengoopta 2006; Logan 2013; Walch 2016.

19 My translation.

20 My translation.

21 My translation.

1930 that they could also be interpreted as chemical substances producing various synergistic effects in the body.<sup>22</sup> This did not change the fact that in the further course of the 20th century work was tirelessly carried out on the antagonistic model of the sexes again in terms of evolutionary biology, psychoendocrinology, or neuroscience.<sup>23</sup>

In any case, in the 1920s it seemed evident that inner secretory processes turn people into fluid, flexible, changeable and capricious states of sex, age, health, vitality. When anatomy at the turn of the 20th century was no longer sufficient to capture the discrete and subtle gender transitions, it was the sex hormones which carried out the psychophysical materializations, created sexual types and established object relationships. After that, there was a variety of sexual types whose sex drive – more of a desire than a need – can be directed towards different objects and demand quick satisfaction. Desire, according to the new sex morality, knows no immorality or even degeneration, but only variations as a form of individualized pleasure. Pathologies became anomalies, became varieties, became (variable) identities.

### The new morality of consecutive polygamy

The universal right to consume, the realization of the pursuit of happiness, constituted an impermanent and profligate identity that (self)realizes itself in choice and desire predetermined by commodity and class society, not in the strict imperative of creative work, diligence and the regulated satisfaction of basic needs.<sup>24</sup> What characterizes the consumerist moment at the beginning of the 20th century was precisely the new, the constant rejuvenation, the hormonal stimulation, the incitement of emotions.<sup>25</sup> Because consumption constantly demands something new, it was youth who best practiced and embodied consumption. In the performance and consumer society, all people are potentially young. The contrast between old and young that was so much invoked at the beginning of the 20th century was at the same time a specific form of the polarization of old and new, the inner drive of consumption.<sup>26</sup> As the

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22 Cf Oudshoorn 1994.

23 Cf. Roberts 2007; Fausto-Sterling 2000.

24 Cf. Lears 1983.

25 Cf. Stoff 2004.

26 Cf. Campbell 1992.

left-wing publicist Victor Francis Calverton put it concisely, bourgeois morality could hardly satisfy this novelty: »Sexual appetencies were never created for economic ›checks and balances‹. Sex desire as a normal, spontaneous thing does not wait on society to instruct it as to its time for expression.« (Calverton 1928: 146) Calverton presented the model of this sexual consumerism as the »Jazz Age«, in which »the ›New Woman‹ and the ›New Morality‹ have made their theatric debut upon the modern scene« (Calverton 1928: 21–22). But the main actor, according to Calverton, is the sexually liberated and androgynous »flapper girl«: »Sexual excitements and ecstasies have become experiences to crave and not to constrain. The flapper is consumed by them.« The emergence of a »new morality« which spread over large parts of the modernized world appeared as explicitly female. Modern consumerist societies became »feminized«.<sup>27</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century, this »feminization«, which was understood at the same time as a tendency to turn away from male rule, met with bitter resistance. Even Sigmund Freud, an important representative of a consumerist theory of sex who insisted on a basic freedom of object-choice, felt compelled in 1905 to state a sharp distinction between the male and female character. The transfer of erogenous irritability from the actively consumeristic clitoris to the passively (re)productive vagina appeared to be decisive for the development of adult sexuality. The price of this repression of the childlike activity, which is at the same time definitely understood as »male«, is »the preference of the woman to neurosis, especially to hysteria«. Accordingly, the goal of pubertal development is also »not to miss the opposite sex« and to prevent inversion (Freud 1972: 112–117, 123–126).<sup>28</sup> In his treatises on sexual theory, Freud was concerned with the development away from infantile sexuality, which he associated with »perversion tendencies«, towards a mature, adult two-person relationship (Freud 1972: 134–135). But Freud was also contemporary with the development in which reproduction became dissociated from sexuality, as Krafft-Ebing had shown so powerfully in his *Psychopathia sexualis*. While this compendium of pleasures can easily be read as the original text of sexual consumerism, Freud presented mechanisms by means of which »polymorphic perversity« could be overcome in a targeted manner, namely through sublimation, without reintroducing the primacy of

27 Cf. Weinbaum 2008 et al.

28 My translation. cf. Stoff 2021: 190–191.

reproduction. For Freud, sexual consumerism could only be infantile and perverse, although he himself pointed to the variety of sex and sexual objects and viewed Steinach's experiments as a biological explanation of his own doctrine. Freud restricted again what Krafft-Ebing had unconsciously opened. But Freud was by no means alone. Sexology as a whole formulated a consumerist tendency in order to curb it at the same time.<sup>29</sup> Sex reformers such as Havelock Ellis or Wilhelm Reich did not understand »sexual liberation« as the abolition of physical boundaries and as the right to indulge in various desires, but as a vehicle for refining a »masculinity« that had been destabilized by »sexual repression« and the commercialization of sex.<sup>30</sup>

The contemporary literature on the »new morality« is unmanageable. The writings of the juvenile court judge Ben B. Lindsey, which were translated directly into German, were extremely influential. Lindsey characterized the petting and promiscuity practicing American youth of the 1920s as revolutionary precisely because it realized the »natural drive«. Wilhelm Reich, for whom the sexual revolution had to be realized in »healthy« coitus, interpreted this as merely a compromise between »old morality« and »sexual economy«: »The adolescents practice all kinds of sexual stimulation, while most of them do not proceed to the sexual act« (Reich 1945: 94). In any case, this set a tone that ebbed and flowed through the entire 20th century. For Calverton, for example, it was an undeniable fact that the sexual revolution of youth and the disintegration of marriage and family had something to do with the contradictions and conflicts of industrial civilization. The »new morality« was then only one effect of the socio-economic changes, which were particularly evident in the increasing economic independence of women. Above all, however, the »old morality« of monogamy seemed to be linked to profit-oriented productivity and property rights. According to Calverton, the »new morality« is a kind of »consecutive polygamy« or »modified monogamy«. Whereas the old society was »in a state of decay« and »old morals have become bankrupt«, sex relations were seemingly renaturalized by consumerism (Calverton 1928: 14, 42–43, 73–76).

The conviction that the sexual revolution of young people must also be directed against capitalism as a whole was shared by Reich, Calverton and the less well-known young socialist Helmut Wagner, author of two small publications on the relationship between sexuality and society, which were published in large numbers. Wagner followed the narrative of the loss of an original

29 Cf. Birken 1988: 111.

30 Cf. Dean 1994: 283–287; Melching 1990.

»healthy sense of sex«: It were the coercive conditions of capitalist class society that brought forth the disregard for everything physical and suppressed and misguided human sexuality »morally as well as materially«. If, however, capitalist society falls into economic and ideological crisis, this must also lead to a sexual crisis (Wagner 1930: 5). Sex reform was therefore not possible within the framework of a capitalist society – also because sex relations were necessarily reified under capitalism. Commodities and exchange relationships, as Wagner explained, are the binders of a society that threatens to fall apart as a result of the capitalist competition between individuals. People are dominated by goods that have become commodities, and the commodity relationship becomes the only »real« relationship between them. This also seemed to be reflected in the relationship between the sexes. Just as the prostitute separates her body from herself as a commodity »which she negotiates on the market for reified sexual needs«, so in the bourgeois »care and business marriage« a woman's body becomes available for the price of her material sustenance (Wagner 1930: 41–42).<sup>31</sup>

In class society, there is necessarily a tension between the biological sex drive, which materializes through the effects of hormones, and a social reality that is based on an »unhealthy« separation between body and soul and cultivates a »moral of private property« (Wagner 1930: 11, 48).<sup>32</sup> In order to understand this sexual crisis as both a social and biological one, the biological function had to be elucidated first. The dissemination of knowledge about the »nature of sexuality«, which was distorted by the capitalist social order, dominated sexology in the 20th century. On the basis of this knowledge, a »new morality«, consistent with sex drive, was to be created. Calverton, Reich and Wagner definitely proclaimed a »new morality« for the proletariat, which, however, first had to overcome its current sexual practice, which was shaped by the compulsive capitalist conditions. Calverton therefore enthusiastically referred to the permissive development in the early Soviet Union under the People's Commissar Alexandra Kollontai (Calverton 1928: 272–284). Wagner, on the other hand, was much more skeptical about the situation in the Soviet Union, since there a »pure physicality« was cultivated that went back to the past proletarian experience of capitalism and the poor economic situation in the Soviet Union (Wagner 1930: 46). The disappointed Wilhelm Reich was also forced to state that the permissive promises in the Soviet Union were replaced by reactionary positions at the latest after Lenin's death (Reich 1945: 154–156). The »new morality«

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31 My translation.

32 My translation.

quickly disappeared again in real socialism, only to reappear in liberal capitalism in the 1960s, notably as a »sex wave«. A »new morality« in a classless society never came about, at least in the way it was discussed in the 1920s. A consumerist sexuality remained under liberal capitalist conditions and was initially realized in sex shops and porn films. Even more, all attempts at new forms of sexual relationships, from free love to open relationships and serial monogamy to polyamory and relationship anarchy, could not be freed from the basic conditions of a sexual market.<sup>33</sup>

### Consumerist bodies

I have detailed this early 20th-century debate because it took place when the consumer society that has been described so extensively in socio-historical research was only just emerging.<sup>34</sup> The discourses and materialities of consumerist bodies can certainly not be presented in isolation from the history of the performance and consumer societies in which they were articulated and designed. It remains important to show how socio-economic conditions have contributed to the fact that different sexualities could have arisen in the first place, and how, for example, the Fordist mode of production made the production of standardized sexual objects possible.<sup>35</sup> But the lines of flight should also be traced that open up when potential and reality come into conflict. The socialist states, with their productivist dogma, proved to be unsuitable for making sexual diversity possible, while in the liberal capitalist societies, varying practices and objects were bound to commodity exchange relationships.

The »new morality« of a consensual-consumerist sexuality became apparent in fleeting relationships and experiences, in promiscuity and permissive sexual practices.<sup>36</sup> Whether this is directly connected with an irresolvable dissatisfaction that demands constant renewal and intensification of the orgasmic pleasure experiences has been discussed for a good century. At the beginning of the 20th century, the psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin identified a kind of »anti-type« in the consumer, who strives for »enjoyment in life« in the economic sense: Even as children, these people used to snack and spend

33 Cf. Debus/Laumann 2018.

34 Cf. Torp/Haupt.

35 Cf. Kahan 2019: 85–99; D'Emilio 1998.

36 Cf. Bierhoff 2016.

»the money that falls into their hands« on carousel rides, going to the cinema and sweets. They are demanding, want to be part of everything, don't deny themselves anything and »would like to lead a good life«. <sup>37</sup> The consumerist body, which in all metaphorical breadth tends towards excess, had to be at least disciplined if its emergence could not be prevented entirely. The fact that immediate consumption was expected without previous labor and performance shook the foundations and values of a productivist order, which was already increasingly identified as ideological at the time. But it was also evident that limitless desire requires regulatory control.

Wilhelm Reich, with the help of biology, inseparably connected the consensual with the consumerist, and the »new« with the »natural« in his introduction of sexual »self-government«:

»There are two kinds of ›morality,‹ but only one kind of moral regulation. That kind of ›morality‹ which everybody acknowledges and affirms as a matter of course (not to rape, not to murder etc.) can be established only on the basis of full gratification of the natural needs. But the other kind of ›morality‹ which we refute (sexual abstinence for children and adolescents, compulsory marital fidelity etc.) is in itself pathological and creates the very chaos which it professes to control. It is the arch-enemy of natural morality.« (Reich 1945: 28)

Without realizing the sexual nature of human beings, the morality of consensual behavior had to remain lip service. Reich, who was obviously aimed at men, was thus formulating problems that are still being discussed at length at the beginning of the 21st century: How can self-regulation and sexual consumption be reconciled? How can a »new morality« really emerge as a »new sexual ethics«? These questions seem all the more urgent the stronger and more resilient the »old morality« proves to be.

## 2. Consumerist Sex (Conclusions)

In the second half of the 20th century, according to an influential contemporary diagnosis, there was an ever closer adaptation of the »new morality« to the capitalist modes of subjectivation. <sup>38</sup> This diagnosis was formulated post-Fou-

37 Kraepelin 1915: 2084. My translation.

38 Cf. Bänziger et al. 2015.



cautious and in connection with the neoliberal transformations in society in the 1990s. Although sociologist Anthony Giddens emphasized the emancipatory potential that results from the separation of reproduction and sex, the concept he introduced of »plastic sexuality« also critically connoted the commodification of flexible sexualities (Giddens 1992: 27). The Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman spoke of a »consumerist syndrome« that is geared towards immediate consumption without delay and seeks fulfillment in every opportunity (Rojek 2004: 294–295). This syndrome manifested itself in the increasing mechanization of sex, in sex toys and sex gadgets that were always at hand, as well as in internet portals that were only a few clicks away. Bauman initially stated rather cautiously that eroticism »must have been first culturally processed and given a form fit for a would-be commodity« to be redeployed as an economic factor, but then under the impression of individualization and digitization rather negatively coined the term of »liquid love« (Bauman 1998: 22; Bauman 2003).<sup>39</sup> A liquefaction of intimate relationships had taken place, which – Bauman already referred to »online dating facilities« – was only realized in the market as a rational choice, immediate consumption and risk-free non-commitment (Bauman 2003: 65). Finally, sociologist Eva Illouz showed how much gender stereotypes and certain romantic notions are interwoven with the consumerist sexual order in capitalism (Illouz 1997). What these quite different analyzes have in common is that the consumerist »new morality« is a practice that always has to be lived and shaped, i.e. it is itself productive and performative.<sup>40</sup>

The project of queer ways of life in particular also corresponds – at least in the sense that Judith Butler defined it – to a consumerist discourse: »Queer« is certainly not an identity but describes the mobility of desire and gender.« (Roedig 2001: 18) However, it is precisely this queer mobility that seems difficult to differentiate from those neoliberal requirements that have guided flexible ways of subjectivation since the late 1970s.<sup>41</sup> The literature on the commodification of queer ways of life in a neoliberal society can hardly be overlooked since the 1990s (cf. e.g. Hark/Laufenberg 2013). In particular, Rosemary Hennessy (1994/95) showed clearly that the visualization of queer sexualities and their liberation from heteronormative tyranny cannot escape the laws of a commodity society. Would neoliberalism then be queer or the queer neoliberal? Here, too, it probably makes more sense to simply state the inseparability of economic and

39 Cf. Hobbs/Owen/Gerber 2017.

40 Cf. Schmidt et al. 154.

41 Cf. Engel 2009.

desire-political discourses and to work out the contradictions and possibilities of a consumerist line of flight.

The new consensual-consumerist morality was constituted at the beginning of the 20th century as a discursive practice that awaits its realization, that has remained a promise and, as has been discussed since the late 1920s, first has to be freed from reification and commodification. Herbert Marcuse, who defended the »pleasure principle« against the »reality principle« in the 1960s, explained that class interests were always at work in the commodity. Sexuality must therefore first be withdrawn from the »market of domination« (Marcuse 1969: 11–12). The sex revolutionary optimism of the 1920s and 1960s seems obsolete today. The »market of desires«, which has expanded considerably primarily due to the new technologies at the end of the 20th century, carries consumerist lines of flight just as much as it also transforms desire into commodities and, with Foucault, makes it ubiquitous as »sex«: sexual and commodity fetishes belong together. Not only does every internet portal follow, as Paul B. Preciado puts it, the masturbatory logic of pornographic consumption, but also all optimizing and prosthetic things are inextricably tied to the logic of an industry and the lusts of a performance-based social order (Preciado 2013: 39). Preciado accordingly showed that the experimental transition through testosterone administration is still inextricably linked to those pharmacological embodiments on the pornographic market that reproduce and control the existing sex and gender order and its modes of subjectification (Preciado 2013: 39, 142–143). The political goal to which Preciado alludes would then not be a sexual revolution, but the democratization of the consumption of hormones, which requires »a radical change of our gender and sexual topographies« (Preciado 2013: 230). However, Regenia Gagnier already emphasized that one can hardly speak of democratization given the conditions of a neoliberal society (Gagnier 2000: 59–60).

In his diagnosis of the times, Helmut Wagner referred to another problem of consumerist sexual morality (Wagner 1928/29: 351). At the end of the 1920s he was convinced that individual private ownership of the means of production would be replaced by collective private ownership by corporations and trusts. Accordingly, sexual private property in marriage is then replaced by sexual collective property. This seemed necessary not least because otherwise, if sexuality is understood as the intimate togetherness of at least two people, a large number of sexually dispossessed people would necessarily remain, even under modernized conditions. The more extensive and at the same time more fleeting the possibilities and objects of desire, the more complex the initiation of inti-

macy between two people appears. Wagner therefore spoke of the necessary »trusting of sexuality« in order to redeem the proclaimed »right to sexual life« qua »sexual collective property« for everyone. That there should be no property rights in sexual relationships (although there should be pain of loss) was also one of the basic statements of Wilhelm Reich's sex economy (Reich 1945: 28). In capitalist societies, however, the anti-trust legislation (so far) has by no means led to the kind of trust that Wagner had imagined. Instead, competing individuals must offer themselves on a market that is still explained in terms of evolutionary biology.<sup>42</sup> Neither dating apps nor dildos, vibrators or sex dolls seem to solve this basic problem. Quite apart from those who are working on the restoration of the »old morality«, the flexibilization of desires in liberal capitalism, as can be read for example in Michel Houellebecq, also produces the inflexible and disappointed, the incels and misogynists who want back private ownership of »the woman« or dream of post-sexual transhumanism (Houellebecq 1998).

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42 Cf. Stoverock 2021.

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