Sexual Politics and Feminist Science

Leng, Kirsten

Published by Cornell University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57364
Race and calls for its regeneration were cornerstones of women sexologists’ analyses and constituted key rationales for their demanded sexual reforms. Their invocations of race, specifically in connection to sex, mark out their ontological and political investments in eugenics, an integral aspect of early twentieth-century sexology and sex reform politics. Simultaneously a self-proclaimed science of human heredity, a code of sexual ethics, and a social movement, eugenics was dedicated to the enhancement of “racial quality.” Eugenics offered a worldview that framed social improvement as a racial project and viewed sex as its point of intervention.¹ In Germany, the supposedly more scientific field that dealt with such questions and was closely allied to eugenics was referred to

as racial hygiene. Racial hygiene expanded somewhat on eugenics by considering both heredity and environment as factors that influenced evolutionary processes. Eugenics and racial hygiene were allied fields that were often treated interchangeably. Common to both was an evaluative impetus, that is, a desire to classify humans as either “fit” or “unfit” according to a range of purportedly heritable traits. German-speaking women sexologists were not exceptional in their enthusiasm for eugenics; in recent years, numerous historians have pointed out that a range of progressive social and political activists were highly committed to eugenics in Germany and elsewhere. Eugenics arguably amounted to an international obsession in the early twentieth century.²

At first blush, eugenics’ appeal for female sexual theorists is not obvious. Many eugenicists insisted that nature intended for women to serve only as the reproducers and caretakers of the race; therefore, women ought to forsake any activity that interfered with their reproductive ability. The man credited with coining the term “eugenics,” Francis Galton, envisaged and idealized women, in Richard Soloway’s words, as “submissive vessels for conveying and nurturing the vital germ plasm provided by their mates.”³ Nevertheless, eugenics appealed to the female sexual theorists studied here for a number of reasons, of which I will mention three. First, as Lucy Bland has observed of the situation in Britain, racial discourses offered women social esteem and political capital through the subject position of the “race mother,” which was framed as both morally and evolutionarily superior to men (and, presumably, childless women), and which positioned women as the “link

---

² For a comprehensive global history of eugenics, see Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ Richard Soloway, Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 114. In his reading of Galton’s antifeminist attitudes, Soloway insightfully muses that “underlying much of this sort of rhetoric was an almost palpable fear of the loss of power and control on the part of men if women did not need or want them and declined to fulfill their biological destiny” (129).
Second and somewhat relatedly, it offered women the chance to infuse agency into their maternal role by asserting final decision-making power over the terms and conditions of reproduction and claiming a larger role in public life. Writers like Johanna Elberskirchen argued that, as bearers and nurturers of children, women played a more important role in human evolution than men; consequently, they should play a greater role in shaping the social conditions confronting future generations. Eugenics gave women a basis upon which to claim that they had the right to reject unfit male partners, challenge husbands’ assumed right of unrestricted sexual access to their wives (and even reject the institution of patriarchal marriage itself), insist upon social, legal, and economic equality with men as a foundation for sound sexual decision-making, and demand financial support from the state in the form of maternal welfare. All such reforms, women argued, would help them successfully realize their responsibilities as “race mothers.” Such claims resonated at a time when the health of national populations was emerging as a political and social issue, and when physical and cognitive disabilities, understood as the result of hereditary “taint,” increasingly constituted sources of familial shame and occasions for secrecy.

Third, eugenics politicized and publicized sexual ethics and sexual governance. Race thinking profoundly shaped many women sexologists’ views on sex as something that did not take place in isolation, but rather within the context of a broader interdependent community. These women sexologists were attuned to the consequences of pursuing sexual desire, and this consciousness shaped the kinds of demands they were willing to make on women’s behalf.

Nevertheless, eugenics produced no singular or shared sexual politics among female sexual theorists. While they generally agreed that sexual independence and empowerment would improve both


individual women’s lives and “the race” itself, they disagreed on what women’s sexual independence and empowerment looked like. This disagreement resulted from their divergent understandings of the purpose of sex and the nature of women’s sexuality, which had consequences for the kinds of reforms they advocated. Intriguingly, these disagreements among women mirrored debates among eugenicists regarding the relationship between sexual freedom and racial regeneration. George Robb has noted a helpful ideological division between what he termed moral eugenicists, who believed sex was exclusively reproductive and inferior to spiritual love unions, and progressive eugenicists, who attributed racial degeneration to sexual repression, particularly women’s sexual repression.  

Although Robb’s analysis focused on British eugenicists, his insights characterize cleavages among eugenicists and racial hygienists in Germany as well. Whereas the ideas of women sexologists like Johanna Elberskirchen represent a form of moral eugenics, this chapter examines those consistent with progressive eugenics. Specifically, it examines how eugenics underwrote a vision of sexual reform that treated women’s greater sexual freedom and autonomy as commensurate with—in fact, fundamental to—racial regeneration. Here, sexual freedom was understood as a “positive liberty,” that is, as a “freedom to” engage in heterosex on the same terms as men, and experience sexual pleasure in heterosexual intercourse. My analysis draws upon the historiographic foundation laid by scholars whose work has shown that many female sexual theorists in German-speaking Europe and beyond believed racial regeneration provided the foundation for arguments against sexual conservatism, particularly for women.


In what follows, I focus on the ideas of one writer, Grete Meisel-Hess, and offer a synthetic reading of texts she published before the First World War. Meisel-Hess’s ideas have appeared elsewhere in this book, but here receive sustained attention for a number of reasons. Meisel-Hess’s prolific output, which included novels, monographs, lectures, articles, and pamphlets, articulated a multi-faceted analysis of contemporary social and sexual problems. She offered new interpretations of female and male sexuality and put forward a comprehensive set of sexual reform demands. Meisel-Hess’s work also exercised a remarkable international influence in the early twentieth century, and was fairly well-received by her male sexological colleagues. From a twenty-first-century perspective, her work is highly challenging. On the one hand, she was a fierce champion of women’s (hetero)sexual autonomy, extramarital monogamy, and what we might call alternative family forms. She also brought an explicitly materialist analysis to bear on her examinations of sexual and social problems: for her, capitalism and patriarchy are intertwined forces of destruction and degeneration that propelled sexual and “racial” crises. On the other, she was a staunch maternalist, ambivalent about birth control, and deeply invested in eugenics and the politics of racial improvement.

It is precisely this confounding blend of feminist sexual radicalism and racialism that call out for analysis. Like the work of many of her male peers in the early twentieth century, particularly in the years immediately preceding the First World War, Meisel-Hess’s sexological contributions were thoroughly saturated by eugenic precepts and preoccupied with the fate and fortunes of the race. However, unlike male sexologists, Meisel-Hess insisted that the liberation of female sexuality, marked above all by women’s ability to select their sexual partners, initiate sexual encounters outside of marriage, and determine the conditions of their maternity, would solve both sexual and racial problems. Meisel-Hess’s work demonstrates the ways that racial thinking not only bolstered new understandings of female and male sexualities, but also helped
underwrite a sexually radical worldview that placed women, their

desires, and their sexual agency at its center. Thinking in terms of

race provided Meisel-Hess a way to conceptualize and articulate

women’s erotic power.

At the same time, an analysis of Meisel-Hess’s writings illumi-

nates how racial discourses and eugenic logics, when combined

with feminist insights and new scientific ideas about female sexual-

ity, gave rise to demands for greater restrictions on and regula-

tion of certain women’s and men’s sexuality. Within Meisel-Hess’s

work, the reader encounters unequal evaluations of human life,

and a great stress on “health” as a criterion for sexual rights and

freedoms. A critical examination of Meisel-Hess’s ideas illuminates

the social, subjective, and selective character of supposedly natural

rights claims, above all the “biological right” to sexual freedom

articulated by many women sexologists. It also illustrates the chal-

lenges female sexual theorists faced when confronting the ethics

of women’s sexual liberation; that is to say, it shows how they

struggled to balance women’s sexual freedom and autonomy with

a sense of responsibility for social consequences, specifically po-

tential reproductive consequences—an important consideration in

an era when women lacked easy access to reliable contraceptive

knowledge and technologies.

Before proceeding further, a quick note regarding language. Through-

out the chapter, I deploy “race” as a noun and as a modifier

(as in “racial regeneration,” for example). In the early twentieth

century, “race” was a particularly slippery term with many pos-

sible meanings. As noted earlier, “race” could connote humanity

itself; it could also signify nationality, continental identity, ethnicity,

or skin color. In what follows, I also use terms in currency at the

---

8. Although race was a polysemic concept during the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries, in this chapter I do not examine the theories of race associated

with Count Arthur Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Such theories

of race stressed the importance of blood, rather than physiology, in defining ra-

cial difference, and concerned themselves primarily with questions of purity, unity,

and aesthetics. Gobineau posited an “aristocracy of blood” that depended upon

a rather stark separation between the races, and an insistence upon the superior-

ity of the white race. See Weindling, *Health, Race, and German Politics*, 51–52.
time, such as “fitness” when discussing eugenicists’ and women sexologists’ ideas. These terms, while still in use today, meant something different in the past than they do in the twenty-first century. “Fitness,” for example, connoted innate, inherited, and superior mental and physical ability, and not an exclusively physical condition an individual could attain through exercise and diet. I make these points about language here to indicate my awareness of, and distance from, early twentieth-century uses of these terms, and thereby avoid the use of scare quotes serving this purpose.

Race, Sex, and Science in the Early Twentieth Century

Over the course of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, an array of social actors including scientists, politicians, and social reformers became increasingly interested in, and anxious about, race. For these groups, race provided a language and episteme for discussing and analyzing populations, specifically their “quality” and quantity. Race thinking signaled a new way of conceptualizing collective human life as organically interconnected, interdependent, and sharing a common fate. This view of humanity owed much to the then-fashionable doctrine of monism, which rejected the separation of spirit and matter and held that society ought to be governed by the same laws as the natural world.9

In Germany, racial panics primarily stemmed from anxieties surrounding the future of the newly unified nation. Emerging in the decades before the turn of the century as a major economic, military, and imperial power, Germany experienced changes that were unprecedented in their speed and scope. Domestically, the nation rapidly transformed from a largely agrarian to an industrial economy, with cities like Berlin exploding thanks to new economic migrants. This development may have represented progress in the eyes of some commentators, but it came at a cost, as evidenced by the ill health and poor living conditions of the urban laboring poor. Indeed, in pre–World War I Germany, the populations that often

provoked racial panic were “not racial outsiders, but marginalized insiders whose very existence threatened national and class ideals,” as Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine have noted of Britain. Of particular concern were the “massed and urban poor,” the so-called problem populations of industrialization.\textsuperscript{10}

In the early decades of the Wilhelmine era, the German state attempted to mitigate the damages of industrial capitalism—as well as the threat of workers’ radicalism—by enacting a pioneering array of social legislation, including workers’ insurance and pension programs. By the turn of the century, however, reformers and scientists began to argue that the solutions to Germany’s so-called social question lay not only in prudent welfare policy but also in biology. They began to look inward, to heredity and reproduction, as the keys to humanity’s improvement, and became especially drawn to eugenics, the supposed science of good breeding, which maintained that individuals’ life chances were primarily determined not by material conditions, but by the genetic inheritance they received at birth. Developed by Darwin’s cousin Francis Galton, eugenics treated heredity as the key to racial improvement, and examined how reproductive choices affected hereditary outcomes. According to eugenicists, traits such as intelligence, self-control, and diligence were essential for human survival and improvement.\textsuperscript{11} Eugenicists insisted that men and women in possession of these desired (yet highly subjective) qualities ought to seek them out in their potential reproductive partners, to the exclusion of all other considerations. Galton for one viewed his science as a new secular religion aimed at inculcating a “sentiment of caste among those who are naturally gifted.” He wanted the elite members of his envisioned “natural aristocracy of talent” to breed exclusively with each other and effect racial regeneration through the purification of genetic lines.\textsuperscript{12} Eugenicists understood sex as ideally an act of


\textsuperscript{11} Soloway, \textit{Demography and Degeneration}, 23.

\textsuperscript{12} Intriguingly, as Richard Soloway notes, in Galton’s unpublished novel \textit{Kantsaywhere}, the racially blessed inhabitants of this fictional eugenic utopia “worshipped a sort of fuzzy, omnipresent life force represented by judgmental
reason, not passion, and insisted that a fundamental precondition for racial regeneration was the reform of reproductive practices and sexual ethics along these lines.

Eugenics as a science built upon numerous intellectual foundations, including scientific theories of heredity dating back to the late eighteenth century, as well as Malthus’s theory of population and stirpiculture, or animal husbandry. However, in its sense of urgency and dire consequences, eugenics was especially indebted to theories of degeneration and Darwin’s theory of evolution via natural selection, which emerged in the late 1850s. Both degeneration theory and natural selection stressed the decisive importance of inherited traits not only for individual health and well-being but also for the survival and improvement of the species. Psychiatric theories of degeneration, first outlined in Bénédict Augustin Morel’s *Physical, Intellectual, and Moral Traits of Degeneration* (1857), deployed Lamarckian theories regarding the transmission of acquired traits to suggest that psychopathology was the product of biological inheritance. Degeneration theory further insisted that psychological abnormalities were atavistic, that is, reflective of a more primitive evolutionary state. Darwin’s theory of evolution via natural selection, as outlined in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), held that creatures best adapted to their environments are more likely to survive, reproduce, and transmit their traits to future generations. Conversely, traits that did not aid survival would eventually become extinct.

Eugenic ideas became extremely popular with middle-class intellectuals and social reformers at the turn of the century as these groups became disenchanted with the failings of liberal capitalism ancestral spirits who closely watched the progress of selective breeding.” See Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration*, 81.


14. Darwin’s theory of natural selection incited an intellectual tendency commonly referred to as Social Darwinism, which advocated unmitigated social competition to ensure the survival only of “the fittest.” Social Darwinism is markedly distinct from eugenics, although the two are often confused: eugenicists disliked the randomness and anarchic competitiveness of the Social Darwinist vision, and believed that the extinction of “useless” traits should be made certain. Contrary to Social Darwinism, eugenicists believed that regulating and rationalizing natural selection was key to racial improvement.
and more favorably disposed to collective, interventionist solutions. They were particularly attracted to the idea that identifying supposedly meaningful and unchanging differences between humans could help establish a natural order over the chaotic and contested transformations of social and political life. As British sexologist Havelock Ellis claimed in *The Problem of Race-Regeneration* (1911), studying and regulating the transmission of racial traits offered the chance for people to take control of their collective fate. Whereas environmentalist approaches to social problems assumed that “we [humans] have no control over human life and no responsibility for its production,” Ellis insisted that individuals “possess the power, if we will, deliberately and consciously to create a new race, to mould the world of the future.”

The appeal of eugenics—and of racial discourses more generally—lay in its proclaimed ability to definitively resolve moral and political questions by establishing and evaluating innate differences between and within human groups.

In spite of eugenics’ claim to scientific status, early twentieth-century eugenicists actually understood very little about the mechanisms of inheritance and genetic transmission: most of their ideas were based on statistical extrapolations of probability from patterns with family trees and crude derivations of Mendelian genetics. Nevertheless, eugenics quickly infiltrated sexology. Sexologists’ strong embrace of eugenics is signified rather explicitly by the name of the first professional sexological society, the Medical Society for Sexual Science and Eugenics, established by Magnus Hirschfeld and Iwan Bloch in 1913. That sexologists were simultaneously eugenicists is perhaps not surprising in light of the field’s development and envisioned mandate. As many scholars have pointed out, many sexual researchers, in particular psychiatrists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing, were concerned with degeneration, and sought to root out pathologies that contributed to individual and social

---

decline. Sexologists’ interest in eugenics also makes sense in light of the field’s mission to create knowledge that would shape sexual behavior. For sexologists like Max Marcuse, sexology’s mission encompassed the goal of protecting the state and society by inhibiting the reproduction of the unfit and maximizing the fertility of those whose lives were deemed valuable.17 As Volkmar Sigusch has observed, sexology and eugenics shared the same nightmares and fantasies: namely, “that misery . . . in the form of unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, sexually transmitted diseases, deformity, criminality, etc. . . . could be reduced until eradicated through a focused intervention into reproduction and through biologically based measures.”18

Most of the sexologists mentioned in this book were not proponents of “negative” eugenic measures such as involuntary sterilization; instead, they championed positive measures like robust welfare provisions that would support children and families. Beyond such state-based measures, they supported reforms to prevailing sexual ethics, norms, and values that they hoped would guide individual behavior and decision making. Progressive eugenicists maintained that individuals had to internalize their responsibility “not only to generate life, but . . . to regenerate life,” as Havelock Ellis put it, by either reproducing or refraining from reproducing.19 Although such an ethical stance could be viewed as provoking a tension between an individual’s sexual liberties and his or her reproductive “responsibility,” eugenicists like Ellis argued that sexual freedom was rooted not in license, but in self-governance, specifically in “order, self-control, sympathy, [and] intelligent regulation.”20

Many female sexual theorists shared progressive eugenicists’ sexual-ethical vision. They stressed the relationship between individual sexual choices and their broader collective consequences, often citing the spread of venereal diseases and their hereditary

18. Volkmar Sigusch, Geschichte der Sexualwissenschaft (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2008), 325.
20. Ibid., 71.
effects as a devastating example. However, female sexual theorists also drew critical attention to the moral, legal, and social contexts within which individuals—particularly women—made, or could make, decisions about their sex lives. As Grete Meisel-Hess’s work demonstrates, the bulk of feminist sexual theorizing at the turn of the century questioned what kinds of sexual rights and freedoms could be biologically and socially justified in view of the individual’s inextricable, organic ties to his or her larger community.

Female sexual theorists also agreed with male eugenicists’ emphases on women’s critical role in effecting racial regeneration and the importance of maternal well-being in determining the “quality” of her offspring. In *The Task of Social Hygiene* (1912), Havelock Ellis went as far as to declare the “question of eugenics” to be at one with the “woman question,” as “the breeding of men lies largely in the hands of women.” While many women sexologists agreed with eugenicists’ claim that racially fit women had a duty to bear children, they did not believe that women’s roles ought to be limited to mothering and caretaking. Moreover, they insisted that racial regeneration required that women be empowered to make autonomous sexual decisions, including about the timing and number of children. At the turn of the century, German-speaking women not only articulated these arguments in books, public talks, pamphlets, and journal articles, but also organized (with like-minded men) to demand their realization. In prewar Germany one organization stood out in its encouragement of women’s sexological analyses of sex, race, and women’s empowerment: the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform.

“Procreate, Not to Multiply, but to Advance!”
The League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform

The League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform was certainly not alone in its concerns with race and its mobilization

---

of a eugenic rationale in the service of social reform. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, eugenic ideas inspired a range of social movements around the world. The wide-ranging and flexible appeal of eugenics is evidenced by the fact that it was adopted not only by white social reformers who feared threats to “racial purity,” but also, for example, by African Americans and German Jews as defense mechanisms against hostile white majorities.\textsuperscript{22} Within these movements, women often played a key role. For example, Britain’s first eugenic organization dedicated to publicly disseminating and popularizing eugenics, the Eugenics Education Society, was founded by Sybil Gotto in 1907. Although men formally led the society, women did most of the work, as Ann Taylor Allen has noted. In fact, the society’s membership was approximately 40 percent female.\textsuperscript{23}

In Germany, women constituted only about a fourth of the membership of the nation’s primary eugenic organization, the Society for Racial Hygiene. Its founder, physician Alfred Ploetz, envisioned the society as a vehicle for the promotion of race hygiene. Though Ploetz was interested in recruiting female members, he was extremely hostile toward the involvement of feminist sex reformers or supporters of “modern sexual ethics.” Paul Weindling notes that the women involved in the society were specifically tasked with challenging radical sex reform ideas. According to Weindling, Ploetz initially conceived of the society as forming “an elite breeding group,” wherein women could receive professional education insofar as they obeyed their “‘higher’ duty to the race.”\textsuperscript{24} By 1913, the society had the support of seven female doctors; only one of them, the gynecologist Agnes Bluhm, had prominent ties to the “moderate” German women’s movement. Most of the women


\textsuperscript{23} Allen, “Feminism and Eugenics in Germany and Britain,” 480.

\textsuperscript{24} Weindling, Health, Race, and German Politics, 146.
involved in the society were not professionals, and were described only as wives and daughters.\textsuperscript{25}

Contrary to the Society for Racial Hygiene, the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform championed a progressive, feminist eugenics. Almost all of the women sexologists studied in this book were members or active supporters of the league, which provided a crucial platform for the expression and dissemination of their work through its journals \textit{The Protection of Mothers} and \textit{The New Generation}. By 1908, the league could boast 3,800 male and female members, a number quite large for a radical sex reform group, as Ann Taylor Allen has pointed out.\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, according to Edward Ross Dickinson, the league was the largest and most active sex reform organization in Germany before the First World War.\textsuperscript{27} In contrast, the Society for Racial Hygiene had 150 members in 1908, and by 1914 reached only 425 members.\textsuperscript{28}

Competing claims exist surrounding the formation of the league. Most scholars maintain that although it was the brainchild of Ruth Bré, who took tentative steps to establish the group in 1904, it was founded in Berlin in 1905 by an eclectic mix of radical and left-leaning feminists, socialists, physicians, racial hygienists, and political economists.\textsuperscript{29} This diverse group included feminists

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\expandafter\ifx\csname l@25\endcsname\relax\expandafter\bibitem\csname l@25\endcsname
\bibinfo{author}{Ibid.}
\bibinfo{year}{26.} Allen, “Feminism and Eugenics in Germany and Britain,” 480.
\bibinfo{year}{27.} Dickinson, “Reflections on Feminism and Monism in the Kaiserreich,” 191.
\bibinfo{year}{28.} Allen, “Feminism and Eugenics in Germany and Britain,” 480.
\bibinfo{year}{29.} The poet and teacher Elisabeth Bouness, a.k.a Ruth Bré, claimed the league as her creation long after its formation. After falling out with the other members of the organization, she alleged that money meant for settlements for unmarried mothers was stolen from her. Helene Stöcker also asserted ownership over the league’s origins, and insisted that she founded the league with fellow feminist Marie Lischnerewska out of frustration with her feminist colleagues’ failure to explicitly demand radical sexual reforms. Most of the scholarly literature engages both claims, while siding in favor of Stöcker. The league would be rocked by controversy again in 1910, after a falling out between Stöcker and Adele Schreiber over the direction of the league and the fate of funds earmarked for the building of homes for mothers. Schreiber’s Nachlass in the Bundesarchiv Koblenz provides a rich source of documentation regarding both controversies. See Folders 2.15, 2.17, 2.19, 3.1.1–41, Nachlass Adele Schreiber, Bestand N1173, Bundesarchiv Koblenz. For a general history of the league’s early years, see Bernd
Helene Stöcker, Adele Schreiber, Henriette Fürth, Maria Lisch-newska, and Marie Stritt (later joined by Grete Meisel-Hess); sexologists Iwan Bloch, August Forel, Magnus Hirschfeld, and Max Marcuse (who was kicked out by 1908); Social Democratic Party leader August Bebel; and sociologists Max Weber and Werner Sombart.\(^\text{30}\) The league sustained its diversity by rhetorically synthesizing its members’ concerns with women’s rights, racial regeneration, sexual ethics, and motherhood by stressing the interconnections between individual sexual liberties and perceived racial duties to the community. League members endeavored to develop what Edward Ross Dickinson has described as “an explicitly feminist and democratic vision of the relationship between the sexes, and of the human condition, centered on the dominant scientific dogma of the day: the theory of evolution.” Beyond evolution, the league’s platform also drew upon “philosophical materialism and an anti-Christian stance.”\(^\text{31}\) As part of its program, the league sought to reform the laws, norms, and values governing sexual life. Its members demanded equal rights for children born out of wedlock; an end to the sexual double standard; equal rights for women within marriage; sexual education in schools; the legalization of contraceptives and abortion; the recognition of extramarital relationships (akin to what today would be called common-law relationships); an end to the state regulation of prostitution; and financial support for all mothers, regardless of whether they were married or not.\(^\text{32}\)

After 1910, they also fought against the attempt to criminalize sex acts between women. Though estranged from the broader women’s movement because of its radical positions—it’s application to join the League of German Women’s Associations was rejected in 1909—the league was feminist in its orientation and its leadership. In fact, the league’s explicit and uncompromising feminism would


30. Rosa Mayreder and Sigmund Freud belonged to the Austrian branch of the league.


32. Ibid, 195.
ultimately alienate many early male supporters, including Alfred Ploetz. At times the league proved too radical even for its feminist members, as evidenced by Henriette Fürth’s departure from the league because of its “sexual-anarchist propaganda.”

The league’s intersecting concerns are best demonstrated by its portrayal of the plight of the unwed mother. The league represented the unwed mother as a victim of society’s unscientific, patriarchal attitudes toward sexuality, which denied women’s physiological need for sexual activity. Though not all league members believed that sex must lead to reproduction, most agreed that women’s destiny was motherhood. The league therefore demanded sweeping reforms to sexual ethics that would enable the recognition and support of unmarried mothers and their children. It also proposed pragmatic social reforms that would provide state support for unwed mothers and their children, ranging from infant homes to maternal welfare. Importantly, these arguments and claims were premised not only upon women’s physiological needs, but also upon what were described as racial needs. In its 1905 petition to the German parliament, for example, the league lamented the loss of high-quality life as a result of the perverse and unnatural sexual ethics that penalized reproduction among young, racially healthy parents. Likewise, as various drafts of the league’s 1908 Constitution reveal, it considered mothers to be at the very heart of national futures—and thus women’s well-being and development as crucial to racial improvement.

---

33. Ibid., 193.


In addition to stressing reforms that would enable more women in various conditions to become mothers, many league members also provocatively connected women’s reproductive rights and freedoms—that is, their right not to become mothers involuntarily—to the project of racial regeneration. However, the question of contraception and abortion was a fraught one among league members, despite the fact that the league officially supported and maintained institutional ties with German and international neo-Malthusian organizations such as Social Harmony and the British Malthusian League. While insisting that women should have the right to control their fertility, many members of the league, including feminists, nonetheless insisted that racially fit women have a duty to become mothers, and that their failure to reproduce would have dire racial consequences.

Beyond its practical work of advocating for legal reforms and social welfare measures, the league engaged in an ongoing ideological struggle aimed at changing the ways their contemporaries thought about female sexuality and heterosexual relations of power. Its members raised powerful questions and advanced provocative arguments regarding the meaning of sex itself and the individual and social implications of reproduction. Arguably, this intellectual labor constituted the league’s most important and enduring historical contribution. As part of its efforts to champion women’s sexual agency and voluntary motherhood, the league interrogated the justice and consequences of existing sexual ethics and governance, and was highly critical of the hypocrisy and “superstition” that it believed inhered within Christian sexual morality. Thanks to the guiding influence of its erstwhile president Helene Stöcker, the league was primarily dedicated to advancing a feminist “New Ethic” to reform sexual life through a “re-evaluation of values.” The New Ethic was inspired by a range of intellectual and political influences including sexual science, eugenics, socialism, and even Nietzschean philosophy. Edward Ross Dickinson has characterized the central demands of the New Ethic as the liberation of sexual relationships from the “institutional and ideological constraints imposed by Christianity,” an acceptance of the central importance of sex as a “natural” feature of individual and social life, and an
embrace of relationships between men and women based on mutual love, respect, and shared responsibility for the happiness of both partners and children, “regardless of civil or sacramental forms.” Through the New Ethic, Stöcker sought to fight what she saw as the damaging asceticism of the “old morality,” which viewed sex as evil, insisted on a separation between spiritual and physical existence (to the denigration of the latter), and ultimately produced cultural attitudes and values that deplored and disparaged earthbound pleasures. Above all, in crafting the New Ethic Stöcker sought to “establish this life, our life, as if it were valuable.” Following Nietzsche, she wanted to craft an ethic that said yes to life, and above all to treat the sex drive as a positive aspect of existence, especially for women. In Stöcker’s words, “Realizing the ideal of human beings whose bodies are strong, happy, and healthy, whose minds are noble and mature and whose souls are caring, seems to be the highest goal for all of us.”

Stöcker’s New Ethic involved a complex temporality: it not only addressed present-day problems within heterosexual relationships, but also considered the future implications of sexual decisions and behaviors. As she noted in her 1905 article “Toward the Reform of Sexual Ethics,” “the greatest difficulty of the sexual problem does not lie in the relationship between man and woman alone; it becomes very complicated when a child is involved.” Here is where eugenics entered into the New Ethic. As part of this new program, Stöcker insisted that “we do not want to become hypocritical and state that intercourse is only moral when it serves procreation. As man has subjected all other things to his reasonable understanding, so he has to become master even more of one of the most important matters of mankind: the creation of a new human being. One will have to find ways to prevent terminally sick or deranged people

39. Ibid.
from procreation.” Stöcker later argued that there were certain “cases in which a child would be a crime: for example among the chronically ill, or third-degree neurasthenics.” In 1913, she even called for the introduction of laws preventing the reproduction of “criminals and the mentally ill,” and in 1914 declared that “if the mere existence of the defective . . . is a danger and impediment to the state,” it was a social right and duty to prevent their birth “with all the methods of science.” Clearly, for Stöcker this life-affirming New Ethic was meant to affirm particular lives, namely, those identified through their “strong, happy, and healthy” bodies and “noble and mature” minds.

The “Modern Worldview” of Grete Meisel-Hess

While the New Ethic was Stöcker’s creation, it clearly shares ideas in common with theories and arguments put forward by many of the women sexologists featured in this book—especially Grete Meisel-Hess. Meisel-Hess joined the league in 1908 following a move from Vienna to Berlin. She not only gave numerous public talks on the league’s behalf, but also published frequently in its journal, The New Generation. In addition to her articles for The New Generation, Meisel-Hess explored the relationship between race, sexuality, women’s rights, and sexual reform in novels such as The Intellectuals (1911) and nonfiction treatises such as In the Modern Worldview (1901) and The Sexual Crisis (1909). Meisel-Hess’s most famous work, The Sexual Crisis, was hugely influential and attracted an international readership. Among her fans were Havelock Ellis, British feminist and sex reformer Stella Browne, and the socialist publisher and translator Eden Paul. In The Task of Social Hygiene, Havelock Ellis insisted that The Sexual Crisis

41. Ibid., 9.
42. Quoted in Dickinson, “Reflections on Feminism and Monism in the Kaiserreich,” 205.
43. See, for example, Ellis, Task of Social Hygiene, 130; Stella Browne to Havelock Ellis, 25.12.22, Ellis Add. MS 70539, Havelock Ellis Papers, British Library Manuscripts and Archives. See also Lesley A. Hall, “Stella Browne and the German
deserved study, as he believed that Meisel-Hess had demonstrated, “in her femininely clever and frank discussion of present-day conditions,” that the women of the future “will be full, strong, elementary natures.” Her work offered a vision of “the future world, fostered by the finer selection of a conscious eugenics, and a new reverence and care for motherhood,” wherein “we may reasonably hope for a truly efficient humanity, the bearers and conservers of the highest human emotions.”

Meisel-Hess’s work combined a range of intellectual influences. Beyond progressive feminist analyses and demands emanating from sex reform movements (above all the league’s claims on behalf of voluntary motherhood), her writing brought together new scientific theories and research on sex and sexuality, monism, eugenics, and racial hygiene. Like many of her feminist colleagues in the league, Meisel-Hess was also inspired by Nietzschean philosophy. She was even an early adopter of Freudian psychoanalysis. This diverse blend of influences contributed to Meisel-Hess’s status as a unique voice in the sexological field. Arguably, her ability to assimilate feminism, maternalism, sexual science, and eugenics contributed to her more favorable reception among male sexologists like Havelock Ellis, and to the promotion and discussion of her lectures in journals like Sexual Problems. The Sexual Crisis was reviewed widely in journals, including predictable journals like The New Generation and Sexual Problems, as well as the Political-Anthropological Review, the sex reform journal Sex and Society, and Journal for the Fight against Venereal Diseases. In the English edition of The Sexual Crisis, American eugenicist Dr. William J. Robinson went so far as to endow Meisel-Hess with the title of “Doctor,” writing that, “as a stimulus to thought, Dr. Meisel-Hess’ book has few equals.”

Likewise, in his review for The Free Words, Friedrich Alasberg described The Sexual Crisis as a “ruthless yet

---


44. Ellis, Task of Social Hygiene, 109, 130.

sensible study” of contemporary sexual life that offered a courageous, penetrating, and thoroughgoing revelation and understanding of existing sexual relationships—though he bristled at her critique of modern man.46 Yet some male reviewers of The Sexual Crisis remained wary of the text because of what they characterized as its distinctly feminine standpoint. Sexual Problems featured a review of The Sexual Crisis that stressed at the outset that it was a “serious” book from which men and women alike could learn a lot; at the same time, it complained that “Mrs. Meisel-Hess sees everything through the eyes of a woman,” making it “difficult for a man to follow her at all times.” This was particularly true of Meisel-Hess’s insistence on women’s sexual freedom and pleasure as the solution to sexual and racial problems, which the author rejected as thoroughly individualistic and irresponsible.47

Whether The Sexual Crisis reflected a “woman’s point of view” or not, Meisel-Hess’s analysis of the problems of race and sex did depart from those offered by her eugenically informed male peers in significant ways. Contrary to some male eugenicists, racial hygienists, and sexologists, who viewed women as instruments for racial improvement and who maintained that feminism was causing racial degeneration by luring women, specifically middle-class women, away from their “duty” to mother by encouraging them to pursue educational and professional opportunities, Meisel-Hess argued that racial degeneration was the result of existing patriarchal arrangements of sexual life that suppressed women’s sexuality. Within her texts, both racial degeneration and what she termed the “sexual crisis” were interdependent and inextricable phenomena, and stemmed from the harms caused by restrictions on women’s free exercise of their sex drive. Perhaps Grete Meisel-Hess’s most succinct and impassioned expression of this argument can be found in her contribution to the radical feminist volume Marriage? Toward the Reform of Sexual Morals (1911). In an essay entitled

“The Sexual Morality of Woman—of Today and Later,” she declared that “the thing that we complain about and in which we recognize a crisis condition in the sexual life of civilized peoples” is the fact that “women are denied the normal measure of life’s happiness, sexual happiness as well as love and fertility, [and] that they are separated from them as a result of unnatural social causes.” In Meisel-Hess’s view, the repression of women’s sexuality could no longer be supported thanks to women’s growing demands to develop as well-rounded individuals, and to “the ever growing and improving consciousness of society of its true reproductive interests.”

The following analysis of Meisel-Hess’s ideas draws from texts she published before the First World War. While drawing primarily from The Sexual Crisis (1909), it also includes her monograph In the Modern Worldview (1901) and her articles “The Sexual Morality of Woman—of Today and Later” (1911) and “Sexual Rights” (1912).

For Meisel-Hess, the single underlying cause of the sexual crisis and racial degeneration was capitalist patriarchy. As we will soon discover, she viewed the social and economic orders as inextricably intertwined, and maintained that their particular constitution held profound implications for the future and welfare of the race. Within Meisel-Hess’s analyses of the sexual status quo, capitalist patriarchy was held responsible for producing the unnatural social conditions that inhibited women’s sexual fulfillment and autonomy. The conjoined forces of male domination and free market economics restricted women’s expression and exploration of their sexuality (as well as their economic security) to monogamic marriage—which Meisel-Hess referred to as a “fenced precinct”—and to prostitution. Women who did not occupy the role of either wife or prostitute were consequently excluded from sexual life altogether and rendered economically insecure. This denial of women’s “right of free choice of sexual partner,” which Meisel-Hess

---


49. Meisel-Hess, Sexual Crisis, 35, 39. Subsequent citations of this work appear parenthetically in the text.
maintained constituted one of woman’s “most elementary human rights,” had dire racial consequences (98). Specifically, it perverted the natural order by placing sexual selection exclusively in male hands, as women were dependent upon men financially and sexually. Here again we can hear echoes of arguments premised upon sexual selection theory encountered elsewhere. Meisel-Hess maintained that male-dominated sexual selection represented a “grossly unnatural state of affairs” that “conflict[ed] sharply with the selective process by which the excellence of the species is maintained” (22). A natural selective process, she asserted, relied upon the “freedom of [sexual] choice on the part of women (and, of course, also of men)” (22).

Noteworthy is the fact that, in the previous statement, the inclusion of men appears almost as an afterthought: indeed, in Meisel-Hess’s view, women’s selection was of primary importance. Meisel-Hess maintained that male-dominated sexual selection was not only unnatural but also based on selfish criteria, whereas female-dominated selection was altruistic and aimed at racial improvement. Here, Meisel-Hess’s arguments especially resemble those of Johanna Elberskirchen. Meisel-Hess stressed that male-dominated sexual selection excluded “superior” women from marriage because most men deemed these women undesirable due to their independence of mind and will. This situation not only created a particular sexual misery for these individual women, but also prevented the “further evolution of the species” by inhibiting “highly evolved individualities” from reproducing (62). Meisel-Hess noted that “men who find themselves unable to enter into satisfactory relationships with women of the newer types can still find plenty of available women exhibiting the characteristics of the old order. But women of the new time will not accept the old type of family relationship, based upon woman’s unconditional spiritual subordination, and involving the denial of all woman’s developmental possibilities” (316).

50. “Woman’s love,” Meisel-Hess asserted,” is general rather than individual. Woman, far more than man, is an instrument in the hands of the species. Man wills, desires to assert his own ego, deliberately and defiantly pursues his own ends.” Meisel-Hess, Sexual Crisis, 124.
Meisel-Hess repeatedly stressed the effects of economics upon women’s sexuality, and especially their sexual freedoms. When it came to contemporary marriage and reproduction, she pointed out that patriarchal arrangements of sexual life subverted women’s selection by requiring that women “give themselves to the men best able to buy, to those who in existing circumstances are often damaged articles and from the biological standpoint of inferior quality” (22). The monetary motivations for marriage depressed racial quality because money gave racially unfit men an illegitimate advantage as potential mates. Meisel-Hess insisted that the economic constraints surrounding marriage encouraged the propagation of the most adaptable men and women (as opposed to the most racially fit), who accommodated themselves—via a process of degradation—to the existing, undesirable status quo created by competitive capitalism. Meisel-Hess thus insisted that patriarchal marriage contributed to the propagation of “the ugliness and stupidity everywhere manifest” (35). When women did marry, they frequently had to do so for money rather than love; however, love, she claimed, produced the most racially fit children (279).

Even more radically, Meisel-Hess argued that marriage’s stranglehold on sexual legitimacy prevented individuals from discovering their optimal sexual partner, and ensured that all children born of extramarital unions, regardless of their racial fitness, would be doomed to failure.51 Like other modern sexual “revolutionists” she objected to the “fetters and shackles” imposed on individuals’ sexual choices, and insisted that “it is wrong that the possibility of reproduction and consequently of selection should be exclusively dependent upon this single form of sexual association” (Sexual Crisis, 32). Although Meisel-Hess was a strict monogamist and insisted that “a permanent sexual and social union with a single member of the opposite sex . . . is the one whose attainment both sexes will and should forever strive,” she declared that this goal “can be attained only by traversing manifold phases of life. An eternal pledge must not be enforced by coercion” (32).

Because of the dangerous racial implications of existing sexual arrangements, Meisel-Hess called for the reordering of sexual and social life. Specifically, she argued for reforms that were directed “at complete freedom for all those forms of the erotic life which promote racial progress; freedom, above all, for the work of reproduction in so far as this is the outcome of unrestricted natural selection” (32–33). She took care to stress that she did not seek complete sexual freedom, or a “wild” sexuality; indeed, she insisted that “did such freedom exist, it would still in all cases be the individual’s ultimate aim to secure a permanent association with the most suitable mate.” Nonetheless, she maintained that “only under the aegis of freedom can this mate be found” (33).

In her view, an ideal sexual arrangement would “effect a harmonious compromise between the rights and duties of the individual and the rights of the community” (207). Achieving a balance between the individual and the collective was imperative for Meisel-Hess in light of her conceptualization of race. Drawing on Alfred Ploetz, Meisel-Hess conceived of race as an “organic whole” composed of “all the individual organisms that arise out of and transmit this enduring vital unity” (248). According to her, “In every one of us, through the complicated tissue of individuality, there runs an ultimate secret thread of connection with the outer world, restricting the power of self-determination” (102). Whereas the “individual life is transient,” she mused, “the race endures” (248). Meisel-Hess further maintained that achieving a balance between individual rights and duties to the race was necessary in order to make sure that “the economic misuse of valuable human energies [would] be brought to an end . . . above all as regards the energies of women” (207).

Meisel-Hess explicitly declared that the reorganization of social life she envisioned should be guided by science. New achievements in scientific and medical research made possible “a sensible social order.” New knowledge was illuminating “the natural causes of things,” which had previously been obscured by “superstitions of all kinds” that were “collaps[ing] one after another.” 52

---

Meisel-Hess believed that science was in the process of revealing the true nature of “species needs,” which she insisted ought to provide the bases for morality. “Morality is based upon the interest of the species alone,” she declared, “and the only true sexual morality is that which leads to the procreation of healthy and beautiful human beings, that which condemns no individual and no class to misery and misuse, and that which neither suppresses nor artificially corrupts the energies of the heart and of the senses” (Sexual Crisis, 101). Scientifically guided social reform would therefore allow for the simultaneous and reciprocal development of the individual and society.

For Meisel-Hess, “species needs” implied not only reproduction and racial renewal but also sexual experience. Meisel-Hess believed that sex itself constituted a vital physiological and psychological need for women. She declared sex the “focal point of every healthy being whose instincts have not undergone partial or complete atrophy,” and believed that “upon the full satisfaction of the sexual needs depends the attainment of a true equilibrium of the mental no less than the physical personality” (117). Meisel-Hess maintained that the experience of sexual passion heightened one’s creative capacities, and viewed sex itself as an aid to women’s development as individuals (120). According to her, “It seems that a life in which sexual fulfillment is denied is incompatible with fine creative work, at any rate in a healthy woman in whom the instinctive life is normally developed. . . . How should one whose womanly destiny confines her to the desert of sexual renunciation find in that void the energy essential to any kind of active work?” (230–231). Because she believed that women had as strong a need for sex as men, the desire for a satisfying sexual life was universal (117). Writing specifically of women, she argued that “the need for further sexual rights is therefore required not only for a small group.” She therefore demanded that it should be made “socially possible for everyone to satisfy [sexual] desire as may best commend itself to individual judgment”—as long as so doing did not

53. See also Meisel-Hess, In der modernen Weltanschauung, 52, 112.
harm others or the race (*Sexual Crisis*, 117). This caveat is significant, and will be further explored below.

To achieve her desired vision of social reform, Meisel-Hess asserted that women and their sexual needs should be placed at the center of social life; however, because Meisel-Hess believed that women have an “organic” need to become mothers, she stressed above all that women’s “child-bearing function” should constitute “the nodal point of social organization” (246). Indeed, she held that the mother and child formed the “natural central unity of all social structures.” Meisel-Hess argued that women were particularly important from a biological perspective, as contemporary science had shown that women transmitted a significant share of their genetic properties to their offspring. Proceeding from the work of Robert Müller, Meisel-Hess noted that “in the case of men of note, as we learn from their biographies, talent, genius and faculty are most often inherited from the mother” (*Sexual Crisis*, 210).

For Meisel-Hess, then, the path to racial regeneration lay in fundamental reforms that would “facilitate the reproductive activity of ‘fit’ women,” that is, “intellectually and morally independent” women (209). This demand applied to all fit women, regardless of whether they intended to marry. In a passage worth quoting at length, she insisted that reproduction must be freed from its dependence upon any prescribed form of sexual association, for the procreation of the coming generation must be effected during those years in which the energy and beauty of the individual and of the germ-plasm are at their maximum, whether the union between the parents is or is not destined to endure, and without depriving these parents, by social censure, of the possibility of other and socially perhaps more valuable sexual experiences. The way must lie open for the birth of the children of vigor, youth, and free sexual selection, regardless of whether the parents are socially ripe and fit for marriage, or whether they intend to marry. (61–62)

---

55. See also Meisel-Hess, *In der modernen Weltanschauung*, 90. As Meisel-Hess wrote in “Sexuelle Rechte,” “Recognition of women’s right to motherhood outside of marriage,—that is what the best and most independent intellectuals demand today (190).

For these reasons, Meisel-Hess insisted on the need to profoundly transform marriage, intimate relations, and sexual morality generally. In her view, “The welfare of the race and the regulation of the sexual life of mankind are inseparable correlates. The quality of the race is the direct outcome of the existing sexual morality” (282–283). She went so far as to accuse male eugenicists and racial hygienists of failing to consider the dysgenic effects of existing standards of sexual morality and arrangements of sexual life; as she noted, “in the writer’s opinion, those now engaged in the study of racial hygiene have hitherto failed to pay sufficient attention to the fact that the normal sexual system of the civilized world is responsible for the operation of numerous non-selective and even anti-selective factors.” Taking aim at leading racial hygienists, she observed, “In Plötz’s enumeration of non-selective factors there is no mention of this aspect of our normal sexual life, nor have I met with any references to the matter elsewhere” (262).

According to Meisel-Hess, all racially fit women ought to exercise their sexual autonomy and racial responsibility by finding erotically compatible and eugenically fit partners and becoming mothers of a new, healthier, superior generation. In her view, only “where women are able to exercise a preference, where they can choose to accept the embraces of the strongest, the fittest, among the men, and to be impregnated by these, there the selective factor is at work” (22). To this end, she called for the liberation of women’s sexuality and fertility from the exclusivity of contractual marriage, and demanded the recognition of new forms of intimacy through which women could find their “optimal” sexual and reproductive partners. These new forms were particularly important for the young, and would be “inevitably transient in duration” (44). In her view, “Nothing can be more natural than that a truly satisfying sexual partnership should be attained, if at all, only after repeated experiments. . . . A man and a woman cannot really learn to know one another except by living together (or at any rate cannot possibly know one another until after the act of physical union has been effected), . . . it is surely unreasonable to expect that the right sexual partner should be found at the very first attempt” (44–45). She supported cohabitation and sex before
marriage to enable couples to ascertain whether they made a good match, from both a romantic and a eugenic perspective. “During the years prior to the attainment of complete mental and physical maturity and prior to the acquirement of the social conditions suitable for permanent marriage,” she insisted, “there must be provided, for women no less than for men, free opportunity to form temporary sexual unions. In both sexes it is essential that the social as well as the erotic powers should attain their fullest development before the formation of a permanent sexual association, for then only does it become possible to choose the partner best adapted for a life-companionship” (61). Indeed, Meisel-Hess maintained that “a union easily dissolved, but one entered into under official sanction, would seem to be the form best adopted to satisfy the mental requirements of our own and ensuing generations” (44).

To this end, she proposed a range of options of varying duration and permanency, including “erotic friendships,” and “provisional”

57. Intriguingly, Meisel-Hess also celebrated “new opportunities for comradeship among women,” including the “bachelor woman” who cohabited with another woman and may even adopt a child. According to her, this “positive development” indicated that women would have more possibilities for fulfillment and joy outside of marriage; Sexual Crisis, 229.

58. Whether Meisel-Hess meant “erotic” to be synonymous with “sexual” here is unclear. She described the erotic friendship as follows: “The present generation is still untrained for the enjoyment of those forms of erotic life derivable simply from comradeship—forms that will come to fruition only in a more refined and elaborate civilization than our own. The sole love that our generation understands is that which is intended to involve an immediate and permanent association of all the interests of the two lovers. The idea that upon friendship can be based an erotic life at once delicate and satisfying is remote from the contemporary understanding. Erotic friendship—how great are the possibilities of happiness, to-day unutilized and running to waste, derivable from this source! Should any now endeavor to base their amatory life upon such a friendship, how they would be overwhelmed by the forces of social disapproval; and yet not until erotic friendship is tolerated can human beings be freed from their present dilemma, which imposes the choice between coercive marriage (for those to whom marriage is economically possible) and erotic starvation.” Meisel-Hess may have meant “erotic” to denote “sensuality,” similar to feminist poet and theorist Audre Lorde’s deployment of the term in her famous essay, “The Uses of the Erotic.” However, Meisel-Hess’s description of the erotic friendship as a potential expression of “amatory life” and as an alternative to “coercive marriage” suggests that her use of the erotic at the very least included sex (107). For Lorde’s essay, see Audre Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic: The
wives and husbands, “able in either case to satisfy the most urgent needs of the earlier years of sexual maturity, but only during those years and not later” (44). If contractual marriage was to be retained, she asserted that it required women’s economic independence to ensure that women could make their own choice of spouse and enter marriage as equals, motivated only by love (42). However, it should no longer constitute “the only permissible form of erotic life, nor the sole authorized method of reproduction” (42). Meisel-Hess further insisted that if people were to marry, they should do so earlier, so that couples could capitalize on their years of peak reproductive fitness. Late marriages, in her view, were a consequence of placing the burden of economic maintenance exclusively on men, and had the deleterious effects of forcing women into prolonged celibacy and leading men to seek out prostitutes, thereby increasing the risk of acquiring a venereal disease and infecting their future wife and children.

Meisel-Hess’s advocacy of nonmarital and temporary arrangements for (hetero)sexual intimacies was incredibly radical for the early twentieth century, and placed her among the sexual avant-garde of her era. At the same time, these revolutionary changes, along with the enhanced sexual rights and freedoms she extended to women, were premised upon the enhancement of women’s maternal prospects and legitimized by their potentially racially regenerative effects. Throughout her analysis of existing sexual life and within her visions of sexual reform, Meisel-Hess stressed the need to prioritize racial fitness. In this regard, her aforementioned description of childbearing as a social function is revealing. Meisel-Hess believed that because reproduction affected collective well-being, it ought to be subjected to public controls, and specifically to eugenic regulation; in her view, “the child belongs not to the individual, but to the community” (207).

Moreover, like other progressive eugenicists Meisel-Hess intriguingly maintained that greater sexual freedoms required greater self-restraint in the interests of future generations. In The Sexual Crisis,
Meisel-Hess explicitly stated that “limitations must be imposed upon the gratification of the appetites so long as the individual, male or female, remains incompetent to estimate or provide for all the consequences of sexual activity or passivity, and so long as there exists incapacity to control some of the pathological manifestations of the sexual life” (101). Citing racial hygienist Alfred Ploetz, Meisel-Hess lamented that society was already “overweighted with defectives” because the “community makes no effort to prevent the overloading of the race with the less fit” (251). She thus proclaimed that “the higher development of our race should be deliberately pursued by the restriction of parenthood to those human beings best fitted for this privilege” (281).

Nevertheless, Meisel-Hess was wary of negative eugenic measures imposed by the state, such as legal prohibitions or sterilization, that would prevent the birth of the unfit. Though she flirted with the idea of marriage prohibitions, noting that “there are no marriage prohibitions for the diseased, the defective, and the degenerate,” that “syphilitics are allowed without demur to disseminate the virus of this hereditary disease” and that “drunkards may use their degenerate germ-plasm for the production of the new generation,” she stressed more positive eugenic measures: “the production of the ‘well-born’ must be made the concern of the community at large, altogether apart from the question of the marriage of the parents, which is a purely private matter” (252). According to Meisel-Hess, “The most important means to check the decline in the birth-rate and to improve the quality of the offspring would be the enfranchisement of the procreative power of woman”; to this end, she declared the following measures absolutely imperative: “first, an adequate system of motherhood protection; secondly, properly paid work for women, occupations which women can pursue in amplification of their other social functions as wives and mothers, which will make them economically independent and will enable them to enter sexual partnerships upon equal terms; thirdly, complete moral and social approval of every act of motherhood which in no way impairs the quality of the human race; fourthly, intelligently planned hygienic and educational measures for the care and upbringing of children.” These changes, she believed, “would
imply upon the part of the community a vigorous intervention in the sexual crisis on racial hygienic or eugenic principles, in order to restore to human beings their natural right to the fulfillment of their biological destiny, and thereby to give in addition that natural and spontaneous happiness, lacking which even the strongest and proudest natures lose elasticity and undergo partial atrophy and degeneration in enforced sexual isolation” (253).

Meisel-Hess’s disinclination toward negative eugenic measures can be attributed to the fact that she believed that racial fitness cannot necessarily be determined at birth. She insisted that superior human beings could only be truly and accurately identified under a socialist system, which she characterized as a system that aimed for “the abolition of the economic order which renders possible the uncontrolled exploitation of one human being by another.” In her view, “The unfalsified economic selection of the best cannot be effected until a genuine equalization of opportunities has been secured. When all have equal claims to elementary and to higher education, and when all have equal access to the means of production we shall, for the first time, learn who are the truly fit” (268). As a result of this conviction, Meisel-Hess took her compatriot Alfred Ploetz to task for attacking welfare measures and claiming they were undermining the survival of the fittest. “For my own part,” Meisel-Hess wrote,

I am unable to recognize in such protective organization any factors that inhibit the struggle for existence or interfere with the selection of the best. Are the fit more easy to recognize when the workers are exploited without check? Is not limitless exploitation a non-selective factor, and sometimes an anti-selective factor, one calculated to eliminate the stronger varieties also, inasmuch as excessive toil and insufficient nutriment wear down the stronger constitutions no less than the weaker, and ruin the possible offspring even in the germ? This does not lead to the survival of the fittest, but merely serves to make even the fit more and more wretched; and if, in virtue of the law of adaptation, the artificially degraded varieties are able to maintain themselves in the arena, the adaptation is productive of a lower instead of a higher human type. (269)

She therefore insisted that those concerned with racial regeneration ought to question whether capitalism and its exploitative practices
were truly responsible for the “abundance in our midst of mental and physical cripples” (269–270). Given capitalism’s impacts on racial progress, Meisel-Hess argued that society had a duty to protect its weaker members, and to create social and sexual conditions in which fitter children can be brought into the world. After all, she maintained, “the society that cares for the unfortunate, cures the sick, sustains the weakly, exhibits thereby the possession of intrinsic forces of regeneration” (272). In stressing the role of political economy in racial regeneration, Meisel-Hess demonstrated how both socialism and humanism could be reconciled to eugenic and racial hygienic ways of thinking.

Meisel-Hess believed that ideally, sexual life should be self-governing, guided by a eugenically informed sexual ethic and supported through comprehensive welfare policies and a just economic order. Yet her stress on ethics, self-governance, and fertility had particularly strong implications for women: she was adamant in her insistence that racially fit women have a duty to become mothers and to bear many children. Though she did not believe that it was necessary for those who bore children to also raise them, noting that there may be other people more qualified for such work, she insisted that “it is of the first importance that a woman mentally independent and possessed of a good physique should give children to the world” (208). Meisel-Hess consequently maintained a skeptical attitude toward neo-Malthusianism and its advocacy of contraception and abortion. While she believed that people should not be forced to bear more children than they could feed, she nonetheless stressed that every birth that was “annulled” through early death represented a “waste of motherly strength (Mutterkraft)” and national economic value.\[^{59}\]

The other side of the ethical coin was Meisel-Hess’s declaration that racially unfit women had a duty not to become mothers, even if they desired children. Meisel-Hess explicitly described “reverence for procreation” as “the religion of the future” (Sexual Crisis, 281). She maintained that people must approach reproduction as a “sacramental act”—and also recognize that “vast numbers of

\[^{59}\text{Meisel-Hess, “Die Sexualmoral der Frau,” 106.}\]
individuals are quite unfitted for such responsibility” (281). Thus, she declared that parenthood ought to be restricted “to those human beings best fitted for the privilege” in the name of racial improvement (281). According to Meisel-Hess, “Upon the stuff of which man himself is made depends what man himself can make of the world. If he is blighted from birth, the world he creates for himself will be a blighted world. Hence his ultimate world-aim must be a delight in the creation of beautiful and fit human beings” (282). These statements held true not only for man, but also for woman.

Given the implications of individual acts for the collective fate, Meisel-Hess believed that restrictions upon the “freedom of the individual ego” were more than justified (282). She vehemently insisted that “the sexual order must make the aims of racial hygiene its own,” and that individuals must internalize the precepts of this “religion” and use them to guide their own conduct (283). Meisel-Hess therefore premised and legitimized women’s freedom to participate in sexual life beyond contractual marriage by restricting it to those women deemed fit enough to partake of the sacrament of reproduction, who she insisted would exercise a responsible sexual ethic informed by eugenic imperatives. While racial arguments facilitated Meisel-Hess’s call for the liberation of women’s sexuality, they also ultimately led her to impose a considerable ethical burden upon women’s reproductive freedoms.

That women in Germany and beyond were deeply invested in eugenics during the early twentieth century is not a new insight. For the past three decades at least, historians have grappled not just with the reasons underlying women’s investment in the sciences and politics of race and heredity, but also with the legacies of this investment. These questions are particularly fraught and meaningful when it comes to German history. Indeed, the extent to which eugenically committed Wilhelmine scientists and reformers were responsible for creating a discursive and ideological environment that helped make the Nazis’ race-based policies possible has long been a pressing question for German historians.60

60. See Geoff Eley, “Introduction 1: Is There a History of the Kaiserreich?” in Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930 (Ann Arbor: University of
In more recent years, historians have drawn attention to the productivity of eugenics for feminist purposes; that is, they have highlighted what eugenic rationale and arguments enabled women to imagine and demand. Here I have followed a similar tack. I have argued that eugenics, specifically progressive eugenics, appealed to sexual theorists like Grete Meisel-Hess because of its stress on women’s critical role in racial regeneration, as well as its conceptualization of sexual ethics. What distinguished progressive eugenics’ sexual ethics was its emphasis on individual sexual freedom and individual responsibility in the name of racial improvement. Progressive eugenicists insisted that accepting individual responsibility was a precondition of gaining not just sexual rights and freedoms, but existential agency itself. As Helene Stöcker argued in her 1906 monograph *Love and Women*, having and taking control over one’s life, rather than being a passive tool of fate, endowed individuals with the ability—and the duty—to favorably shape the fate of future generations.61 Eugenics facilitated a discourse that positioned women as autonomous sexual agents entitled to certain rights and freedoms—but also tasked with certain duties and responsibilities.

In this chapter I focused not on feminists in general, but on women sexologists, and specifically on Grete Meisel-Hess, whose work combined feminism, sexual radicalism, and eugenic insights and demands. Like those of many of her male colleagues, Grete Meisel-Hess’s analyses of race and sex were inextricably interconnected; she shared their concerns, their values, and their criteria for judging desirable and undesirable physical and psychological traits. Contrary to her male peers, however, Meisel-Hess did not believe that the cause of racial problems lay in the proliferation of hard-wired traits; instead, her diagnosis focused on the inheritance of unjust, unhealthy, and notably patriarchal sexual morals that oppressed women, and on the perpetuation of an exploitative

---

economic system that made true choice impossible for everyone. For Meisel-Hess, racial salvation lay in the elevating power of female sexuality, and in the equalizing forces of socialism. As a consequence, Meisel-Hess’s prescription for racial and sexual regeneration lay in the liberation of the female sex drive from the confines of marriage—and in the support of unrestricted fertility on the part of fit women, facilitated by prudent welfare policies that would ensure their economic security and independence.

Yet Meisel-Hess’s analysis was not entirely empowering: although she demanded sexual liberation for all women, reproductive rights were restricted to women deemed valuable according to eugenic standards. Although she did not believe that individual fitness was readily apparent at birth and opposed state-based eugenic measures at this time, she nonetheless upheld a restrictive standard of physical and psychological health as the fundamental precondition for sexual rights and freedoms, including reproductive freedoms. Like her colleague Helene Stöcker, the only legitimate sexual subjects Meisel-Hess countenanced were those who were supposedly healthy in body and mind, and who would thus contribute to racial advancement. These subjects were the only ones deemed capable of affirming life and enjoying its earthly pleasures. This attitude toward sexuality, and especially the assumption that sexual freedom is only legitimate for those people fulfilling a certain limited standard of health, have had consequences for the development of sexually radical politics, particularly its assumed able-bodied rights bearer.

Part of the appeal of politicizing science and nature lies in the power and authority of making claims based on supposedly fundamental, unchanging essences. While recourse to scientifically revealed “natural laws” may be effective in staking claims, it offers little space to maneuver once these claims have been accepted as fact. When does the security of science become a political straitjacket? When does it restrict or foreclose new visions of subjectivity and social transformation, and inhibit experiments with new ways of being and living? These questions immediately jump to the fore once we reflect on the legacy of women sexologists’ entanglements
with eugenics. At the same, however, it is worth questioning the degree to which biology simply provided a new language for the differential evaluation and treatment of human beings. After all, social criteria such as class, rank, and status—attributes that were “inherited” by generation after generation and at times claimed to be preordained—had long divided humanity, and determined and rationalized different standards of value and treatment. The crucial distinction between biological and social dividing practices lies in the fact that, claims to divine preordination notwithstanding, the latter are unquestionably human creations, subject to human control. While bearing in mind Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s admonition against viewing cultural constructs as “peculiarly malleable ones,” I do maintain that lessons from the eugenic past serve as timely reminders that humans have the power to challenge and change social institutions and arrangements of their own making.⁶²