

Culture, Difference, and Sexual Progress in Turn-of-the-Century Europe: Cultural Othering and the German League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform, 1905–1914

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IS SEXUAL LIBERALIZATION AN historical inevitability? Does greater sexual freedom represent the trajectory of progress? Such questions haunted members of one of the early twentieth century's most radical sex reform organizations, Germany's League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform (Bund für Mutterschutz und Sexualreform). This pathbreaking organization, founded in Berlin in 1905, brought together a remarkable and eclectic mix of feminists, scientists, physicians, politicians, and artists who sought to transform sexual life through social work and philosophical inquiry. Among the league's diverse and high-profile members were left-leaning feminists such as Helene Stöcker and Grete Meisel-Hess, sexologists Iwan Bloch and Magnus Hirschfeld, sociologists Max Weber and Werner Sombart, and Social Democratic Party leader August Bebel.¹ While the league's primary goal was to materially improve the lives of unwed mothers and their children, many of its members, including its erstwhile president and later secretary Helene Stöcker, believed that the league's purpose was much broader and involved a philosophical campaign aimed at "the critical examination . . . [and] renewal and deepening" of sexual ethics.²

In fact, for philosophically minded league members like Stöcker, a thorough overhaul of sexual norms and values was a cultural and evolutionary necessity. According to Stöcker, the laws and ethics governing sexuality in turn-of-the-century Germany reflected "a since-surpassed cultural pe-

All translations from *Mutterschutz* and *Die neue Generation* are my own.

¹ *Reforming the Moral Subject: Ethics and Sexuality in Central Europe, 1890–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 73–75; Bernd Nowacki, *Der Bund für Mutterschutz (1905–1933)* (Husum: Matthiesen Verlag, 1983), app. 8.3, "Eine Mitgliedsliste des Bundes," 143–48.

² Helene Stöcker, "Zur Reform der sexuellen Ethik," *Mutterschutz* 1, no. 1 (1905): 3.

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riod” that had now become an oppressive “burden” under much-changed conditions.³ In her view, the single mother and her pariah status constituted the most potent symbols of the “oppressive” and “burdensome” nature of these outmoded laws and ethics. Stöcker maintained that these women were being punished by old, ascetic, and notably Christian morals that were especially repressive toward female sexuality. This ascetic and misogynist morality, she insisted, was contrary to the progress of human culture, which she claimed was evolving “from compulsion to freedom, to moral self-determination.”⁴ In place of asceticism, Stöcker advocated a “joyful affirmation of life and all its healthy power and drives,”—including the sex drive. According to her, the (hetero)sexual instincts of both sexes were natural and positive; aside from hunger, the sex drive was the “most elementary life instinct” that existed in every healthy individual.⁵ Although Stöcker was the most vocal proponent of sexual ethical reform, her beliefs and her attitudes toward sexuality were shared by other league members; sexologist and league chairperson Iwan Bloch, for example, went so far as to call the sex drive an “important and essential element of our common culture and progress.”⁶

Affirming the naturalness of the sex drive provided the foundation for what Stöcker called the New Ethic, which promoted sexual self-determination and free choice for both men and women. In Stöcker’s view, the New Ethic was realized above all in “a true, freely chosen monogamy” between two equal “personalities” either within or beyond marriage.⁷ According to her, this monogamous ideal represented “the loftiest heights” and “eminent objective” of modern culture.⁸ Greater sexual freedom and self-determination for both men and women would usher in a “spring day of humanity” and

³ Ibid.

⁴ Helene Stöcker, “Unsere Sache,” *Die neue Generation* 4, no. 1 (January 1908): 5.

⁵ Stöcker, “Zur Reform,” 5.

⁶ Iwan Bloch, “Die sexuelle Solidarität der Kulturmenschheit,” in *Resolutionen des Deutschen Bundes für Mutterschutz, 1905–1916*, ed. Helene Stöcker (Berlin: Geschäftsstelle des Bundes für Mutterschutz, 1916), 76.

⁷ See Helene Stöcker, “Die sexuelle Abstinenz und die Stützen der Gesellschaft,” *Die neue Generation* 5, no. 1 (January 1909): 9. Biographical accounts of Helene Stöcker include Amy Hackett, “Helene Stöcker: Left-Wing Intellectual and Sex Reformer,” in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, ed. Renate Bridenthal et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984); Gudrun Hammelmann, *Helene Stöcker, “Der Bund für Mutterschutz” und “Die Neue Generation”*; Christl Wickert, *Helene Stöcker* (Bonn: Dietz, 1991); Kristin McGuire, “Activism, Intimacy, and the Politics of Selfhood: The Gendered Terms of Citizenship in Poland and Germany, 1890–1918” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2004); and Tracie Matysik, “Beyond Freedom: A Return to Subjectivity in the History of Sexuality,” in *After the History of Sexuality: German Genealogies with and beyond Foucault*, ed. Scott Spector, Helmut Puff, and Dagmar Herzog (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 185–201.

⁸ See Stöcker, “Die sexuelle Abstinenz,” 9; and Stöcker, “Aufruf,” 64.

would ultimately help humankind achieve a higher state of evolution.⁹ For Stöcker and like-minded others, Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorism "Do not just reproduce yourselves but advance!" (Nicht nur fort Euch zu pflanzen, sondern hinauf!) provided a powerful motto and mission statement.¹⁰

Much can be said about the substance of Stöcker's beliefs; what I want to draw attention to here is the temporal consciousness evident in the foregoing statements. Stöcker's description of the hegemonic morality as old, ruminations on human progress, assessments of cultural standards, and imperatives to advance all suggest that she thought certain sexual norms, values, and behaviors are appropriate or suited to certain times and places. For league members like Stöcker, sexuality was not static or fixed, and change was unavoidable (and desirable). Stöcker and others thought that sexuality, like other aspects of human existence, was subject to the laws of evolution and required conscious guidance to ensure that it progressed in a healthy direction.

To prove sexuality was subject to the laws of evolution, league members mobilized ethnological evidence of cultural difference derived from research, travel, and hearsay. Specifically, they drew contrasts with cultural and racial Others who supposedly represented humanity's sexual past. Between 1905 and 1914, the league's journals *Mutterschutz* (Protection of Mothers) and *Die neue Generation* (The New Generation) published numerous articles that invoked ethnological observations and studies of supposedly "backward," "degenerate," and "uncultured" peoples to demonstrate that sexual change had occurred and to position Europe at the forefront of sexual progress.¹¹ As was generally the case in turn-of-the-century ethnology, these texts invoked an array of cultures spanning space and time, including not only colonized peoples but also Germany's geopolitical rivals like Japan and ancient civilizations such as the Greeks and Romans and, intriguingly, India and China. Beyond cementing Europe's premier place on the sexual-evolutionary scale, this rhetorical move was meant to convince a skeptical public that the league's vision for sexual improvement, which included the dangerous idea of (hetero)sexual independence for women, was simply the

⁹ Anonymous, "Mitteilungen des Bundes für Mutterschutz: Aufruf 180,000 uneheliche Kinder," *Mutterschutz* 1, no. 6 (1905): 47; Stöcker, "Unsere Sache," 1.

¹⁰ The aphorism famously comes from *Thus Spake Zarathustra, Part I*. On the role of Nietzschean philosophy within Helene Stöcker's ideas and among early twentieth-century German feminists generally, see Heide Schlüppmann, "Radikalisierung der Philosophie: Die Nietzsche-Rezeption und die sexualpolitische Publizistik Helene Stöckers," *Feministische Studien* 7 (1989); Carole Diethe, *Nietzsche's Women: Beyond the Whip* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1996).

¹¹ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropological and ethnological knowledges were commonly used to provide "the foundation for the construction of a progress from the 'primitive' societies to the height of European civilization" (Sebastian Conrad, *German Colonialism: A Short History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press], 126). See also Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (London: Routledge, 1988).

next stage in the unfolding of evolutionary laws and therefore completely appropriate for a progressive, modern society. However, league members also referenced the sexual lives of cultural Others as examples of the freer, natural, and gender-equal sexual norms and practices the league desired. As I will show in what follows, league members' contradictory invocations of cultural difference produced discursive effects that exceeded league members' intentions.

In this article, I examine how members of the league for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform, particularly Helene Stöcker, practiced cultural Othering as a way of legitimizing their politics and representing them as consonant with the imperatives of progress. These strategies were consistent with other attitudes toward race and cultural difference in an era of intense imperialism, geopolitical rivalry, and cultural anxiety over modernity and sexuality. While much of the existing historiography on the league has concentrated on the feminism, maternalist politics, and eugenic commitments of its members, few scholars have paid attention to the role of cultural difference within the league's discursive politics, and there has been no previous attempt to situate the league in the broader context of German imperialism and geopolitics (*Weltpolitik*).¹² As will become evident, the league can offer an intriguing case study through which to examine how practices of cultural Othering informed early twentieth-century progressive sexual politics—that search for greater sexual freedom and self-determination that many would still consider progressive today.¹³

By drawing attention to the role of cultural difference in early twentieth-century German sex reform politics, I aim to contribute to the ongoing effort to “transnationalize” the history of sexuality. I draw inspiration from Howard Chiang's insight that “the emergence of sexuality . . . was global in scope to begin with, and not a concealed Western project in which places of a distanced Other played no role in the early phases of its conceptual foundation.”¹⁴ Furthermore, by focusing on the discursive

¹² See, for example, Edward Ross Dickinson, *Sex, Freedom, and Power in Imperial Germany, 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Dickinson, “Reflections on Feminism and Monism in the Kaiserreich, 1900–1913,” *Central European History* 34, no. 2 (June 2001): 191–230; Gudrun Hamelmann, *Helene Stöcker, der “Bund für Mutterschutz” und “Die Neue Generation”* (Frankfurt am Main: Haag + Gerchen, 1992); Ann Taylor Allen, “Mothers of a New Generation: Helene Stöcker, Adele Schreiber, and the Evolution of a German Idea of Motherhood, 1900–1914,” *Signs* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 418–38; and Bernd Nowacki, *Der Bund für Mutterschutz (1905–1933)* (Husum: Matthiesen Verlag, 1983).

¹³ For a similar study of the way imperialist knowledges informed radical sexual writing, see Deborah Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer: Lesbianism and War in Early Twentieth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

¹⁴ Howard Chiang, “Double Alterity and the Global Historiography of Sexuality: China, Europe, and the Emergence of Sexuality as a Global Possibility,” *e-pisteme* 2, no. 1 (2009): 44. See also Irvin C. Schick, *The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alterist Discourse* (New York: Verso, 1999), 2.

practices of a specific sex reform organization and by highlighting the varied deployments and diverse effects of their appeals to cultural difference, I seek to contribute to the project, laid out by Edmund Burke III and David Prochaska, of “provid[ing] more complex and historically grounded understandings of the multiple cultural encounters that made the modern world” while recognizing that European empires did not “giv[e] rise to a singular homogenized discourse on the other.”¹⁵ Paying attention to the specific geopolitical context of sex reformers’ Othering practices reveals the confluence of contexts that produced tensions and contradictions within sexual politics in the age of empire. Moreover, it affirms Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal’s broader theoretical claim that studies of transnational sexualities ought to account for “the complex terrain of sexual politics that is at once national, regional, local, even ‘cross cultural’ and hybrid.”¹⁶

Various postcolonial scholars of empire and sexuality, most notably Ann Laura Stoler and Anne McClintock, have described the processes of Othering through which Europeans defined their sexuality and cemented geopolitical relations of power.¹⁷ These unidirectional cultural comparisons clearly depended upon a deeply racialized sense of time and space and a belief in a racial hierarchy of humanity that placed self-consciously modern Europeans at the top.¹⁸ European—and here, specifically German—sex reformers unquestionably viewed the world through the hierarchical lens afforded by their geopolitical and racial privilege; however, they were simultaneously critics of European (German) society, culture, and politics. League members went beyond mere critique of supposedly less advanced peoples and invoked the sexual lives of cultural Others to criticize what they perceived to be the failings of modern German sexual life and to support their alternative set of sexual values and ideals. The particularities of

¹⁵ Edmund Burke III and David Prochaska, eds., *Genealogies of Orientalism: History, Theory, Politics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), ix.

¹⁶ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, no. 4 (2001): 663.

¹⁷ The classic works on the geopolitical role of culture in nineteenth-century imperial relations include Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); and Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994). On the relationship between sexuality and empire, the burgeoning literature includes Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Irvin Schick, *The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alterist Discourse* (London: Verso, 1999); Ross Forman, “Race and Empire,” in *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. H. G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 110–32; and Cohler, *Citizen, Invert, Queer*.

¹⁸ See Chiang, “Double Alterity”; Conrad, *German Colonialism*, 125–26; Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1982). On the history of Europe as a “mythic construct,” see Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, trans. Russell Moore (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).

certain German terms reveal the ambivalence of this enterprise. Germans of this period referred to “uncivilized” peoples as *Naturvölker*, or “natural peoples”—a category constructed by ethnologists and anthropologists to denote a people’s place within the sweep of humanity’s psychological, physical, and cultural development. As historian Andrew Zimmerman notes, well into the twentieth century “nature functioned . . . [within these disciplines] as an unchanging realm of truth, which contrasted with the ephemeral developments of history.”¹⁹ Sex reformers were immersed in these rhetorics, and they romanticized non-European cultures, representing them as the embodiment of freer, simpler, more authentically natural sexual relations and ideals. Yet while these romanticized and exoticizing practices of Othering were meant to strategically support the league’s visions and goals, invocations of cultural difference had intriguing, destabilizing implications. By highlighting aspects of other cultures’ sexual lives and practices as ideals toward which modern, civilized citizens should aspire, reformers implicitly relativized European sexual practices as mere cultural variations and thus threatened to invert racial hierarchies by positioning Europe as “backward” in its gendered and sexual norms. This reversal both undermined Europeans’ claims to sexual superiority and complicated the very meaning of sexual progress.

Understanding sex reformers’ investments in (and reliance upon) cultural difference will first require an exploration of how the sex reform discourse of the German League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform was influenced by the confluence of geopolitical and imperial competition, cultural critique, and specific truth regimes regarding sexuality and science. I then move to a discursive analysis of the varied, at times seemingly contradictory, deployments of cultural difference in texts produced by league members. I will reflect on what these diverse Othering strategies might suggest about the complexities and ambivalences inherent in Europeans’ own sense of sexuality at the turn of the century. I will conclude with a brief consideration of the long-term legacy of such discursive practices for present-day “progressive” sexual politics.

PURSUING SEXUAL REFORM IN AN AGE OF EMPIRE AND UNCERTAINTY: THE VICISSITUDES OF “PROGRESS”

According to the league’s founding appeal, its primary goals were “to protect unwed mothers and their children against economic and moral risks and to eliminate prevailing prejudices against them.”²⁰ To achieve these ends, league members established privately financed local birthing centers for unwed mothers and petitioned various government ministries to provide

¹⁹ Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Anti-humanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 7–8, 121–22.

²⁰ Anonymous, “Mitteilungen,” 258.

expanded maternal insurance provisions, sexual education in schools, and legal equality for children born out of wedlock.²¹ In the eyes of more radical league members, such reforms would not only serve the immediate objective of supporting single mothers but also help undo restrictive and outmoded sexual laws. Moreover, by empowering men and especially women with greater sexual knowledge, legal protections, and economic independence, such changes would create conditions for the exercise of sexual agency and the realization of sexual freedom.

The league's goals, demands, and activities were incredibly controversial in their own time; moderate feminist leader Helene Lange derisively described the league's goals as making the "simple act of increasing the population a great deed," thereby reducing humans to the level of animals.²² Moderate feminists like Lange especially objected to the New Ethic, which Lange accused of promoting individualism and overemphasizing the importance of sexuality.²³ In view of such critiques, league members sought to legitimize their focus on and support of unwed mothers and their calls for sexual ethical reform by appealing to scientific knowledge. In her programmatic article "Zur Reform der sexuellen Ethik" (Toward the reform of sexual ethics) Helene Stöcker called upon "all sciences to help us," because scientific research had uniquely proven "the old ethics to be harmful, the old worldview itself to be unsustainable." The sciences, she maintained, would help to establish "the foundation for a new ethic . . . that proceeds from the changed understanding of human evolution and the connection between spiritual and economic factors."²⁴

Many league members mobilized eugenic arguments to justify their support and demands on behalf of unwed mothers.²⁵ The league's founding appeal explicitly rationalized its mission in such terms, as is clear in its opening lines: "180,000 illegitimate children are born annually in Germany, amounting to almost a tenth of total births. We let this powerful source of our national strength [*Volkskraft*] . . . go to waste because a rigorous moral

²¹ See Stöcker, *Resolutionen*; and Stöcker, ed., *Petitionen des Bundes für Mutterschutz, 1905–1916* (Berlin: Geschäftsstelle des BfM, 1916).

²² Quoted in Anonymous, "Kritik der sexuellen Reformbewegung," *Mutterschutz* 1, no. 1 (1905): 40. This was a recurring column in the journal's early years that served to record attacks made against the league in the media, especially by moderate feminists.

²³ See Helene Lange, "Die Frauenbewegung und die moderne Ehekritik," in *Frauenbewegung und Sexualethik: Beiträge zur modernen Ehekritik*, ed. Gertrud Bäumer et al. (Heilbronn: Eugen Salzer, 1909), 79, 81–82. This volume served to articulate moderate feminists' opposition to the views put forward by radical feminists and sex reformers like Helene Stöcker.

²⁴ Stöcker, "Zur Reform," 5. See also Magnus Hirschfeld, "Sexualwissenschaft als Grundlage der Sexualreform," in Rosenthal, *Mutterschutz und Sexualreform*, 75–84.

²⁵ For detailed examinations of the eugenic beliefs held by feminist members of the league such as Helene Stöcker, Henriette Fürth, Adele Schreiber, and Lily Braun, see Ann Taylor Allen, "German Radical Feminism and Eugenics, 1900–1908," *German Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (1988): 31–56; and Dickinson, "Reflections," 191–230.

code denounces single mothers, undermines their economic existence, and forces them to trust their children in strangers' hands in exchange for money." These children were often of "high quality" (*höher Lebensstärke*), the appeal's authors noted, because their parents were young and healthy; nevertheless, because of the stigma surrounding illegitimacy, they had a higher tendency to die at birth or during infancy. Those illegitimate children who did survive were thought to be vulnerable to recruitment into "the world of criminals, prostitutes, and vagabonds," even though some of them would have become fit for military service. League members proposed reforms that they believed would prevent overly strict moral codes from squandering healthy lives and hampering national development: "To put an end to this robbery of our national strength is the goal of the League for the Protection of Mothers." Supporting mothers was particularly important, as "the mother is the strongest living source of children and is essential to their well-being."²⁶

Beyond eugenics, league members appealed to ethnological and anthropological studies and observations regarding sexual norms, ethics, and practices in other cultures. Although not often acknowledged by scholars today, sexual ethnology and anthropology were key elements of sexology at the turn of the twentieth century, alongside sexual anatomy, sexual physiology, sexual chemistry, and comparative sexual biology, and played a consistent role in league members' rhetoric before the First World War.²⁷ Ethnological evidence constituted a crucial component of seminal sexological studies such as August Forel's *Die sexuelle Frage* (The sexual question, 1905) and Iwan Bloch's *Das Sexualleben unserer Zeit* (The sexual life of our times, 1907). Ethnologists were also involved in editing landmark sexological journals, as demonstrated by the Austrian ethnologist Friedrich S. Krauss's involvement on the editorial board of pioneering sexological journals *Sexual-Probleme* (Sexual problems) and the *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* (Journal for sexual science). Krauss and renowned "sexual ethnologist" Ferdinand Freiherr von Reitzenstein were also members of the league.²⁸

Ethnological and anthropological evidence played a complicated role in league members' writing, as they used that evidence to support seemingly contradictory ends. League members mobilized this knowledge to make

²⁶ "Aufruf," 254, 255, 259.

²⁷ Hirschfeld, "Sexualwissenschaft," 82. An exception to the general historiographic trend is Chiang, "Double Alterity," 36. On the history of German anthropology and ethnology more generally, see Andre Gingrich, "The German-Speaking Countries," in *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, by Fredrik Barth, Andrew Gingrich, Robert Parkin, and Sydel Silverman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 61–156; H. Glenn Penny and Matti Bunzl, eds., *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Zimmerman, *Anthropology*; and Andrew Evans, *Anthropology at War: World War I and the Science of Race in Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

²⁸ Nowacki, *Der Bund für Mutterschutz*, 143–48.

broad evolutionary arguments regarding the temporality of sexual standards. They insisted that sexuality and cultural development or evolution were intimately interconnected and that certain sexual norms were appropriate to certain stages of civilization. However, they also used ethnology and anthropology to demonstrate the diversity and malleability of sexual beliefs and behavior and thus their susceptibility to reform. This seemingly contradictory use of ethnological and anthropological resources actually reflects tensions within German ethnology and anthropology, as well as broader cultural trends in early twentieth-century Germany. According to Magnus Hirschfeld, sexual ethnology revealed “how the rest of social and cultural life centers around sexuality and manifests itself in many laws, morals, and customs,” while “historical and folkloric research” provided evidence of the “varied and changing forms of love and married life.” Anthropology, he argued, helped to shed light on “benign” sexual variation (as opposed to purportedly pathological deviations) and demonstrated that “the boundaries between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal,’ ‘sick’ and ‘healthy’ in sexual life are fluid and fluctuating.”²⁹

Beyond these epistemological uses, however, ethnology and anthropology also helped underwrite a geopolitically influenced, race-based narrative of human and cultural evolution that referenced contemporary nonwhite, non-European, often colonized peoples as examples of “humanity’s” (that is, Europeans’) past while helping to underline arguments about future human progress.³⁰ According to Julian Carter, many sexologists specifically believed that romantic and sexual love were the products of evolution; as Carter observes, in their explanations for the evolution of sexual behavior “‘primitive’ reproductive arrangements developed, across ages of natural selection, into romantic and sexual love between spouses.” Such sexual ethnological studies treated uncivilized people as incapable of affection and emotional commitment; they had intercourse but did not make love. Carter notes that these evolutionary accounts postulated that “the distinction between modern civilized lovemaking and savage intercourse is one of mind and heart, attitude and perception”; only the civilized could “*see* beyond instinct and bodily drives.” Invoking the language of contemporary sexologists, Carter points out that only modern civilized adults were seen as uniquely capable of “long-term, stable relationships held together by mutual ‘comradeship and inspiration.’”³¹ Though Carter’s observations were made on the basis of Anglo-American sexology, these sentiments were certainly shared by league members like Helene Stöcker, who celebrated a “freely chosen monogamy”

²⁹ Hirschfeld, “Sexualwissenschaft,” 82, 83.

³⁰ For a broader discussion of this phenomenon, see Julian Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

³¹ Julian Carter, “Normality, Whiteness, Authorship: Evolutionary Sexology and the Primitive Pervert,” in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon A. Rosario (New York: Routledge, 1997), 155, 159, 160.

as the height of cultural development and who believed that sexual reforms were needed to ensure progress toward this goal.

Acknowledging the racial beliefs informing turn-of-the-century ethnology and anthropology reminds us that these knowledges were shaped by contemporary global contests for power. At the turn of the century, Germany was an emerging superpower, alongside Japan and the United States, in large part thanks to its incredible economic growth following national unification in 1871. Following his ascension to the throne in 1890, Wilhelm II committed himself to realizing what he believed to be Germany's rightful "place in the sun" by following a bold, arguably reckless course of geopolitical engagement (*Weltpolitik*) and joining the European race for empire. Though never as expansive as its rivals Britain and France, Germany began to colonize large swaths of Africa in 1884, including present-day Togo, Cameroon, Namibia, and Tanzania, along with possessions in East Asia and the Pacific. In the years before the First World War, Germany emerged as the fourth largest colonial empire, behind Britain, France, and the Netherlands.³²

As Andrew Zimmerman pointedly observes, imperialism was the *sine qua non* of German anthropology; imperial control over subject populations provided access to "ethnographic performers, artifacts, body parts, and . . . field sites that provided the empirical data that [anthropologists] valued above all else." Moreover, the intensity of Germany's geopolitical ambitions, coupled with the stakes attached to them, helped motivate scholarly research and incite popular fantasies and anxieties regarding cultural Others. Zimmerman argues that ethnological and anthropological research was in part a reaction to the "profound shift in global politics, economics, and culture" occurring at the turn of the twentieth century and fed growing appetites for new, exotic spectacles. Ethnology and anthropology experienced a period of expansion and increasing institutionalization in Germany during this period, a development symbolized most concretely by the establishment of the German Anthropological Association and the Royal Museum of Ethnology in 1886.³³ Moreover, as German historians such as Tracie Matysik and Edward Ross Dickinson have observed, Germany's economic rivalry with Japan made "the Orient" a particular region of fascination

³² On the history of German imperialism, see Conrad, *German Colonialism*; George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Eric Ames, Marcia Klotz, and Lora Wildenthal, eds., *Germany's Colonial Pasts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Sara L. Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne M. Zantrop, eds., *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); and Woodruff D. Smith, *The German Colonial Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978).

³³ Zimmerman, *Anthropology*, 7, 241, 239, 5, 9. See also H. Glenn Penny, "Ethnology and Civil Society in Imperial Germany," *Osiris* 17 (2002): 228–52.

and fear. Indeed, these anxieties were often framed in sexual terms, and a growing discourse on the “Yellow Peril” gave voice to racist paranoia that Europe would be economically and reproductively “swamped” by Asia.³⁴

Imperialism and Weltpolitik generally helped to stir wide-ranging interest in questions of culture and cultural difference and to support Germans’ self-representation as leaders in the vanguard of human progress. They also fed contemporaneous critical debates and anxieties about the consequences of modernity and the desirability of “civilization” (*Zivilisation*). As historian Kevin Repp points out, while diverse commentators celebrated scientific and technological developments, many disliked what they viewed as the “rationalizing, alienating, depersonalizing forces of modern industrial capitalism.”³⁵ Many German intellectuals and social reformers believed that modern civilization and its processes of urbanization and industrialization were having a decidedly negative impact on standards of health and morality, manifested most obviously in the destabilization of gender roles and supposed deterioration of sexual norms.³⁶ Influential turn-of-the-century texts such as physician-journalist Max Nordau’s *Entartung* (1893; translated and published in English in 1895 as *Degeneration*) highlighted the disastrous social and psychological effects of modern life, which included the feminization of man, the masculinization of woman, and a general degradation of sexual morality.³⁷ According to Nordau, increasing rates of hysteria and neurasthenia were symptomatic of the broader social and psychological fatigue, weakness of will, and impotence that afflicted modern, degenerate societies.³⁸ A decade later, in his 1908 essay “Die kulturelle Sexualmoral und die moderne Nervosität” (“‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness”), Sigmund Freud connected the increasing prevalence of sexual neuroses such as neurasthenia and hysteria to civilizational “progress” and specifically to modernity, which he viewed as marked by a greater tendency to repress the sexual instinct or libido.³⁹ Nordau’s and Freud’s discussions

³⁴ Matysik, *Reforming the Moral Subject*, 150, 125–26, 116; Edward Ross Dickinson, “Sex, Masculinity, and the ‘Yellow Peril’: Christian von Ehrenfel’s Program for a Revision of the European Sexual Order, 1902–1910,” *German Studies Review* 25, no. 2 (May 2002): 255–84.

³⁵ Kevin Repp, *Reformers, Critics, and the Paths of German Modernity: Anti-politics and the Search for Alternatives, 1890–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 14.

³⁶ On turn-of-the-century anxieties regarding the “degeneration” of sex and sexual relations, see Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), esp. 9–12; and Gerald N. Izenberg, *Modernism and Masculinity: Mann, Wedekind, Kandinsky through World War I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³⁷ Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, 9th ed. (London: William Heinemann, 1896); Nordau, *Entartung* (Berlin: C. Duncker, 1892). On degeneration as a cultural preoccupation at the turn of the twentieth century, see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³⁸ Nordau, *Degeneration*, 16, 35–42, 536–50.

³⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Die kulturelle Sexualmoral und die moderne Nervosität,” *Sexual-Probleme* 4, no. 3 (1908): 107–28; Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness,” in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Phillip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963).

of degeneration and the ills of modernity connected a crisis in culture to a crisis in gender and sexuality, and their texts thus provide examples of the kind of logic that encouraged reformers to make the same analytical link.

Commentators like Nordau and Freud gave voice to their contemporaries' anxieties about the rapid changes occurring in political, social, and economic life, and they were consciously trying to come to terms with both the losses and the gains of political and scientific progress. An array of German reformers, from women's rights leaders to health reformers to social politicians, feared that civilization would destroy the perceived uniqueness of German culture (*Kultur*), symbolized by the poetry of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller.⁴⁰ Above all, many feared the loss of a sense of "naturalness" and authenticity.

The stakes and tenor of this critical cultural discourse on modernity and civilization suggest that at the very height of German imperialism there existed considerable domestic concern regarding the fragility, and even the desirability, of progress, the meaning of modernity, and the possibility of decline and degeneration. This vocal pessimism regarding the state and fate of German culture prevented reformers from uncritically celebrating it as the pinnacle of evolutionary development, and it implied that other cultures might offer guidance toward a better, healthier way of ordering and experiencing life. As I argue in the following section, the combination of evolutionary claims and relativistic invocations of cultural Others within the league's sex reform discourse reveals both a haunted confidence and a fundamental insecurity about European superiority, one that stemmed from uncertainties regarding the health and validity of Europeans' sexual order, behavior, and ethics.

STANDING HALFWAY, YET NO TURNING BACK: THE IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE IN THE LEAGUE'S DISCOURSE

Between 1905 and the onset of the First World War, the league published a wide range of articles in its journals *Mutterschutz* and *Die neue Generation* that invoked differences between modern or cultured nations and "natural" peoples or "old civilizations" in order to discuss the true nature of love, marriage, and sexual morality. Some of these articles were written by well-known figures like Helene Stöcker, while others were written by authors about whom little biographical information is readily available. *Mutterschutz* and *Die neue Generation* also featured reviews of ethnological studies and

⁴⁰ Repp's study investigates the views of "moderate" women's movement leader Gertrud Bäumer, economist and sociologist Werner Sombart, and liberal politician and Protestant pastor Friedrich Naumann, among others, as representative of the "Wilhelmine Reform Milieu" concerned with the so-called social question. See Repp, *Reformers, Critics*. However, similar views prevailed within the life reform movement at the turn of the twentieth century; see Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

advertised league-sponsored lectures on ethnological themes. Very few of these articles, reviews, or lectures explicitly referenced Germany's imperial adventures and ambitions. Though many members of the league, particularly Stöcker, held anti-imperial views, the league itself does not appear to have adopted an explicit position on German imperialism before the war. Articles addressing German colonial policy, such as Ferdinand Freiherrn von Reitzenstein's "Rassenmischung und Mischehenfragen" (Racial mixing and mixed-marriage questions), began appearing in the 1910s; however, they avoided political critique and focused on eugenics and so-called racial hygiene.⁴¹ Yet despite the league's relative silence regarding German imperialism, the colonial project—and, indeed, German Weltpolitik more generally—undoubtedly informed the discourse examined in this article.

Informed by ethnological and anthropological research, many league members used evidence concerning the sexual lives of other peoples to elaborate an evolutionary narrative of human sexuality. Sexual practices in less developed parts of the world were used as evidence of humanity's sexual past, which league members in turn used to delineate laws and predictions regarding the direction of human evolution. As we will discover, many of these articles pivoted on representations of female sexuality and women's rights, thus displaying the league's feminist impulses. In a series of articles entitled "Eine Soziologie der Liebe und Ehe" (A sociology of love and marriage), Stöcker reviewed sociologist Franz Müller-Lyer's five-volume study, *Entwicklungsstufen der Menschheit* (The stages of development of humanity), focusing particular attention on the volumes *Formen der Ehe* (Forms of marriage), *Die Familie* (The family), and *Phasen der Liebe* (Phases of love).⁴² Stöcker praised Müller-Lyer's work for the way that it charted the evolution of marriage "from the beginning of mankind in its deepest, most secretive origins" and because it suggested that the future of intimacy lay in a model "envisioned and longed for by [the league]." Müller-Lyer's research, Stöcker claimed, proved that "out of promiscuity, polyandry and polygamy we are slowly striving toward the goal of a permanent single relationship whose attractiveness has become so strong and all-embracing that it is capable of granting and providing each person in the relationship a high degree of happiness and human, sympathetic, and harmonious

⁴¹ Ferdinand Freiherrn von Reitzenstein, "Rassenmischung und Mischehenfragen," *Die neue Generation* 10, no. 5 (May 1914): 239–47, and no. 6 (June 1914): 307–24. See also James Broh, "Die neue Generation in unseren Kolonien," *Die neue Generation* 6, no. 6 (June 1910): 236–37; Iros, "Kolonial Sexualpolitik," *Die neue Generation* 8, no. 6 (June 1912): 316–23; Anonymous, "Sexualleben in den Kolonien," *Die neue Generation* 9, no. 6 (June 1913): 327–28.

⁴² Franz Müller-Lyer's study *Entwicklungsstufen der Menschheit* consisted of the volumes *Phasen der Kultur* (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1908), *Der Sinn des Lebens* (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1910), *Formen der Ehe* (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1911), *Die Familie* (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1911), *Phasen der Liebe* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1913).

connection.”⁴³ Through a “strict and factual” method Müller-Lyer drew upon evidence from “natural” and ancient peoples, demonstrating that sexual evolution tends toward greater sexual differentiation, individuation, and refined love between men and women.⁴⁴ Stöcker believed that these insights demonstrated that the further evolution of human sexuality was feminist—that progress could only occur when women enjoyed greater sexual and existential freedom, which would make them full “personalities.”⁴⁵

Other league members and affiliates used ethnological evidence to assert “relative improvements” in sexual life, with European cultures exemplifying sexual progress. In an anonymously authored report on Professor Leopold von Wiese’s lecture “Die Sexualordnung des Orients und das Problem ihrer Reform” (The sexual order of the Orient and the problem of its reform) at the Congress of the International Association for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform in 1913, the author observed that Wiese’s exploration of conditions in “the Orient”—the term that encompassed both East Asia and the Middle East—illuminated in “shocking ways” how the failure to recognize the equal value of women could produce sexual disharmony and sexual misery.⁴⁶ What precisely was so shocking to the author about “Oriental conditions” was left unspecified in the report, though if one were to extrapolate from Wiese’s article “Die Sexualordnung Indiens und das Problem ihrer Reform” (The sexual order of India and the problem of its reform), published in *Die neue Generation* that same year, it is likely that Wiese was referring to sati and the phenomenon of “child brides,” the practices that most shocked European observers.⁴⁷ According to the author, Wiese’s lecture established the importance of the reevaluation and reformation of sexual life along the lines advocated by the league, specifically its feminist goals, such as sexual equality.

Despite this triumphant tone, however, the league member’s report on Wiese’s talk also opened up European practices to critique. During the discussion following Wiese’s talk, a Norwegian doctor, Dr. Heiberg, observed that while illegitimate children in Norway had recently been granted equal legal status, they did not enjoy equal social status; this social inequality, he suggested, showed that “cultured” nations had perhaps not progressed as far as they believed. Stöcker responded with a defense of European progress,

⁴³ Helene Stöcker, “Eine Soziologie der Liebe und Ehe (Teil I),” *Die neue Generation* 10, no. 5 (May 1914): 271.

⁴⁴ Helene Stöcker, “Eine Soziologie der Liebe und Ehe (Teil II),” *Die neue Generation* 10, no. 6 (June 1914): 326–27. For a similar argument regarding sexual progress and a similar use of cultural Others to support it, see Iwan Bloch, “Die Individualisierung der Liebe,” *Mutterschutz* 2, no. 7 (1906): 274–82, and no. 8 (1906): 310–20.

⁴⁵ Stöcker, “Eine Soziologie (Teil II),” 327, 330–31.

⁴⁶ Anonymous, “Referate Professor Dr. von Wiese über ‘Die Sexualordnung des Orients und das Problem ihrer Reform,’” in Stöcker, *Resolutionen*, 77.

⁴⁷ See Professor Dr. Leopold von Wiese, “Die Sexualordnung Indiens und das Problem ihrer Reform,” *Die neue Generation* 9, no. 7 (July 1913): 339–61.

insisting that the “relative improvement in our countries compared with the Orient [demonstrates that it is] possible to advance from the oppressive, desolate harem system to our current status, wherein women as free independent personalities have learned to participate willingly in the enhancement and improvement of the overall sexual life.”⁴⁸ Although Stöcker often criticized German and European society for inhibiting female sexuality, in such direct cultural comparisons between European and “Oriental” nations she discursively transformed European women into independent sexual agents. The report’s author concluded by expressing the hope that “we will sometime in the not too distant future achieve a level of sophistication in the domain of sexual life in which even our current conditions in our great cultures [will] be regarded as just as backward and barbaric as those conditions in Asia appear to us.”⁴⁹ These condescending comments underlined Stöcker’s belief that Germans and Europeans were leaders of sexual progress, though she also insisted that even more cultured nations were in need of further reform.

These invocations of cultural difference relied on the evidence of ethnology to support sexual evolutionary claims, European supremacist self-positioning, and the league’s own particular vision of sexual progress. And yet, Dr. Heiberg’s critical comments also gesture toward alternative rhetorical uses of ethnology within the league’s discourse; specifically, they show how ethnology was used to clear a space for critiques of European sexual norms, values, practices, and institutions. The league’s publications often relied on ethnological evidence and reasoning to support a normative worldview premised upon sexual plurality. In her review of gay rights activist Kurt Hiller’s *Das Recht über sich selbst* (The right over one’s self), Stöcker noted that “morality, as history and ethnology have taught us, has had different contents at different times and among different peoples.” This led her to believe that “the history of morality and ethnology have above all shown . . . [that] until now no single material obligation has ever defined the moral consciousness of humanity in a permanent and absolute way.” Stöcker further asserted that the concept of “objective morality” was an “empirical untruth,” and therefore “no general ethic has prevailed over all people at a given time, at least for modern civilized humanity.”⁵⁰ She believed that educating people about the diversity of sexual practices in different cultures and belief systems would open up a space for individualizing and diversifying intimate relationships.

Whereas Stöcker invoked difference in order to stress plurality and to make room for new practices within German cultures of monogamy, other

⁴⁸ Anonymous, “Referate Professor Dr. von Wiese,” 77.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Helene Stöcker, “Das Recht über sich selbst,” *Die neue Generation* 4, no. 7 (July 1908): 270–71; Kurt Hiller, *Das Recht über sich selbst: Eine strafrechtsphilosophische Studie* (Heidelberg: Karl Winter, 1908).

league members mobilized cultural difference to denaturalize sexuality—that is, to argue against the idea that sexual morals and practices were somehow innately rooted within particular cultures or races. Authors like Hans Berkusky and Felix Theilhaber stressed the role played by economics, law, religion, aesthetics, and social organization in constructing sexual norms. In his 1910 series of articles “Die sexuelle Moral der Naturvölker” (The sexual morals of natural peoples), Hans Berkusky stressed that “everywhere and in all times” moral views are influenced by economic and cultural relations, which produce very different forms of sexual morality in different cultures.⁵¹ Indeed, Berkusky insisted that sexual morality was not rooted in innate moral feelings but rather in social constructs such as the law, custom, and religion and could therefore only be understood in relation to them.⁵² Berkusky’s wide-ranging interrogation of themes such as sexual modesty and nudity within diverse cultures and peoples sought to drive home these arguments.

In a similar vein, physician and birth control advocate Felix Theilhaber’s April 1913 article “Die Geburtenbeschränkung im Altertum und bei den Naturvölkern” (Restrictions on births in ancient times and among natural peoples) sought to frame sexual practices as socially constructed and materially determined. Declaring that “the history of humanity is at the same time the history of the attempt to institute rational population policies,” Theilhaber argued for a more rational approach to birth control and supported this claim with the argument that “the birth problem is age-old.” He described how cultures as diverse as ancient Egypt, the Germanic tribes of Norway, and the peoples of contemporary North Africa, Turkey, Bali, Australia, and “Christian Polynesia” all used chemical forms of contraception and abortion to cope with the “birth problem,” and he insisted that all of these methods were conditioned by social, economic, cultural, and racial hygienic concerns.⁵³ By demonstrating the cultural and historical variability of humanity’s struggle with reproduction, Theilhaber aimed to show that Germany’s laws and practices could and ought to change in accordance with broader social, political, and economic developments.

Another important mode of argument in the league’s publications was to reference cultural difference as part of an argument against strictures on female sexuality. As part of her challenge to Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso’s claims regarding women’s “organically determined greater

⁵¹ Little biographical information is available about Hans Berkusky; however, he authored numerous articles on various aspects of sexual ethnology that were published in the *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, the sex reform journal *Geschlecht und Gesellschaft*, and the sexological journal *Sexual-Probleme*. He is also the author of *Vernichtungszauber* (Braunschweig: F. Vieweg & Sohn, 1912).

⁵² Hans Berkusky, “Die sexuelle Moral der Naturvölker,” *Die neue Generation* 6, no. 8 (August 1910): 307.

⁵³ Felix Theilhaber, “Die Geburtenbeschränkung im Altertum und bei den Naturvölkern,” *Die neue Generation* 9, no. 4 (April 1913): 184, 185–90.

sexual coldness,” writer Margarete Lissauer invoked the cultural practices of “natural people at the beginning of evolution,” who she maintained were more positively disposed toward female sexual expression and pleasure.⁵⁴ Stöcker also consistently emphasized how the higher degree of tolerance for female sexual expression in other cultures made the sexual double standard that informed German sexual morality particularly glaring: “Other peoples have highly regarded physical love in their cultures, and they have made allowances for the special qualities of women’s needs in love to a higher degree than . . . a great portion of the world of [civilized] men seems to allow today. Not only in old cultures, for example in India, but even among savages we discover everywhere a far-reaching understanding of the needs of women; those uneducated and unrefined in matters of lovemaking would simply be ridiculed.”⁵⁵ Elsewhere, Stöcker maintained that “old cultures, such as the Egyptian, Arabic, and the late Roman, have experienced a freedom and development of the rights of women in the sexual domain and in marriage . . . that we have not achieved in our cultured lands [*Kulturländer*] so far.”⁵⁶ Both Lissauer and Stöcker relied on the purportedly greater sexual freedoms enjoyed by women in other cultures to argue that female chastity is neither a natural nor a desirable phenomenon, and they criticized as unnatural and even backward European sexual morals premised upon women’s forced sexual abstinence and premarital celibacy.

Above all, appeals to cultural differences in sexual norms enabled the league and its members to argue that systems of sexuality must be considered open to social and legal change. Such insights obviously served to legitimize the league’s demands for sexual reform; however, in some instances they were even used to suggest that other cultures may have a better system of sexual values and institutions than Germany or Europe generally. In his review of Dr. Friedrich Krauss’s *Das Geschlechtsleben in Glauben, Sitte und Brauche der Japaner* (Sexual life in the beliefs, morality, and customs of the Japanese), Dr. Alfred Kind mused that “since Japan has become one of the world powers, one can state that uninhibited joy in the erotic does not harm the strength of society.” In fact, Kind argued that the lessons of Japanese sexuality suggested that it is “indeed time that we begin to compare the sexual morality of other races with our own.” “If we want to be healthy, healthy without excesses,” Kind maintained, “we have to raise our heads above the narrow-mindedness of our sexual restraints and study what gives rise to the immense vitality of East Asian peoples.”⁵⁷ Kind’s positive—and

⁵⁴ Margarete Lissauer, “Untreue bei Mann und Weib,” *Die neue Generation* 5, no. 11 (November 1909): 488.

⁵⁵ Helene Stöcker, “Die sexuelle Abstinenz und die Stützen der Gesellschaft,” *Die neue Generation* 5, no. 1 (January 1909): 8.

⁵⁶ Helene Stöcker, “Ehe und Konkubinat,” *Die neue Generation* 8, no. 3 (March 1912): 127.

⁵⁷ Alfred Kind, “Literarische Berichte: Dr. Friedrich S. Krauss, *Das Geschlechtsleben in Glauben, Sitte und Brauch der Japaner*,” *Die neue Generation* 4, no. 9 (September 1908): 346.

decidedly romanticized and exoticized—representation of Japanese sexuality goes so far as to suggest it as a model for reformed German sexual norms and practices.

In a similar rhetorical move, Stöcker drew upon observations she formed of Turkey during a lecture tour in a critique of German sexual morality. She noted approvingly what she claimed to be Turkish men's greater sense of paternal responsibility, which she believed had kept illegitimacy rates low. She also celebrated the salutary moral effects of a general abstinence from alcohol consumption, which meant that Turkish men were far less likely to "live out" (*sichausleben*) their sexual desires at women's expense. Even the "official polygamy of the Muslims," she argued, appeared to have some advantages over the "unofficial polygamy of Europeans." Indeed, Stöcker went so far as to assert that "the relativism of all human endeavors is demonstrated exactly at this point—the fact that our Western culture, of which we are so proud, does not represent an absolute higher cultural standard." Yet despite her praise for Turkish sexual culture, Stöcker nonetheless stressed that this "certainly in no way meant that we would like to turn back to Muslim conditions"—even if such a return were possible. Rather, she maintained that conditions in Turkey "put the hypocrisy and inadequacy of our conditions and the need for improvement in a clearer light. We in Europe have remained stuck halfway through the journey: we have shed some external barriers but have not yet abandoned our crude, uncivilized attitudes toward women and love."⁵⁸ Stöcker's conclusion to "Liebe und Ehe in der Türkei" (Love and marriage in Turkey) encapsulates many of the difficulties that appeals to cultural Others posed for the league's evolutionary ideology and its progressive sexual ideals. Although invocations of cultural difference could be used to underwrite arguments regarding the relationship between sexuality and cultural evolution, they also raised troubling questions. Particularly when used to demonstrate the plurality and contingency of sexual practice, ethnological evidence actually suggested that Europeans might not be as sexually evolved as they believed and that they might not be heading in the right evolutionary direction. After all, the mere fact that these other cultures had already achieved some of the attitudes and social norms that sex reformers were pushing for called into question Europeans' definition of progress and their self-proclaimed status at the vanguard.

Whether Stöcker and her fellow sex reformers consciously chose to provoke their readers through such critiques or whether this was simply an unanticipated discursive effect that exceeded their intentions remains open to question. What an examination of the league's deployment of cultural difference does seem to make certain is that its members' understanding of sexual progress and the policies they advocated to achieve it emerged in part

⁵⁸ Helene Stöcker, "Liebe und Ehe in der Türkei," *Die neue Generation* 5, no. 5 (May 1909): 171–78, 178.

through a discursive denigration and romanticization of the Other. Perhaps more interestingly, this dynamic seems to suggest reformers' complicated desires both to distance themselves from cultural Others and to embrace certain of their sexual practices in ways denuded of cultural context. It further intimates the incredible ambivalence that pervaded early twentieth-century discussions of European sexual mores: cultural Others both did and did not represent what many reformers wanted to be and become. Thus, while cultural Others were never allowed the power of self-representation in this discourse, their strategic invocation shone a critical light on the meaning of European sexual progress, destabilizing any easy triumphalist rendering of Europe's cultural evolution.

WHITHER SEXUAL PROGRESS?

This article has examined the multiple and at times contradictory discursive uses of cultural difference within one of the world's first movements for sexual reform and liberation, the German League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform, in the years before the First World War. I have demonstrated that the league's rhetoric was problematically and inextricably tied to unequal geopolitical power relations and that its members' arguments about the sexual practices of cultural Others reveal an extremely ambivalent juxtaposition of "natural" and "cultured," "backward" and "modern," forms of sexual behavior. On the one hand, league members used cultural difference to underwrite their narrative of evolutionary sexual progress; on the other hand, they deployed cultural difference in order to relativize and critique European sexual norms, thus instrumentalizing sexual plurality and diversity in order to demonstrate that change was possible. This mobilization of cultural difference had other, perhaps unanticipated effects. By reversing existing hierarchies, invocations of cultural difference threatened to undermine representations of Europe as the vanguard of sexual evolution, and it implicitly posed the question of whether Europe was sexually evolving in the right direction.

Revealing these tensions complicates the history of German sex reform because it draws attention to the ways in which purportedly progressive sexual ideas and politics emerged through the complex tensions between global relations and "metropolitan" cultural conflicts.⁵⁹ It also highlights the instability of the reformers' distinctions between the cultured and uncultured, the modern and the uncivilized. However, this exploration of modes of discourse in early twentieth-century Germany even raises uncomfortable connections to our own sexual present. Still today, sexual

⁵⁹ On the tensions between "colonial" and "metropolitan" spaces and interests, see Alan Lester, "Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth Century South Africa and Britain," in *The New Imperial Histories Reader*, ed. Stephen Howe (New York: Routledge, 2010), 139–46.

politics that promote sexual freedom and individual sexual autonomy as leading objectives and that are most common in Europe and North America continue to be rather uncritically described as progressive. In other words, present-day sexual politics seem to remain wedded to a teleological narrative of progress. Arguably, this conceptualization of sexual progress continues to rely upon the presence of cultural Others through and against whom ideals and demands are defined. The “tradition-modernity” split, as Grewal and Kaplan note, is still very much present in Western cultures, and the United States and Europe are still continually figured as the homes of “freedom” and “democratic choice” and as the “sites of progressive sexual movements.” Grewal and Kaplan specifically note that the construction of modern cosmopolitan feminist subjects requires the simultaneous construction of “traditional women” who suffer at the hands of “African and Islamic ‘barbarism’”; sexual violence and discrimination are thus displaced onto the Third World.⁶⁰

What makes the sexual present different is precisely the proliferation of critique and resistance to the one-sided representational politics of American and European self-styled progressives.⁶¹ Postcolonial scholars and critics have powerfully pushed back against imperialist impositions and have forced a confrontation with an ambivalence latent in progressive European sexual politics since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet what remains to be confronted is the persistence of Othering and the attachment to the concept of progress within sexual politics themselves. Will continued critique of Othering lead to the abandonment of this practice within sexual politics? And what would it mean to abandon a concept of progress in conjunction with sexual politics?

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⁶⁰ Grewal and Kaplan, “Global Identities,” 669–70.

⁶¹ For powerful accounts that challenge Western representations of non-Western women, see, for example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” *Boundary 2* (1984): 333–58; Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). See also the criticism of Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn’s *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women World Wide* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), in Sunil Bhatia’s, “Op-Ed: Nicholas Kristof and the Politics of Writing about Women’s Oppression in Darker Nations,” *Feminist Wire*, 3 March 2013, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2013/03/op-ed-nicholas-kristof-and-the-politics-of-writing-about-womens-oppression-in-darker-nations/>; Kathryn Mathers, “Mr. Kristof, I Presume? Saving Africa in the Footsteps of Nicholas Kristof,” *Transition* 107, no. 1 (2012): 14–31.

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