Vincent Streichhahn

5 On the Discourse of the “New Sexual Morality” in the German Empire: Robert Michels’ *Sexual Ethics* between Women’s Movement, Social Democracy, and Sociology

Research on Robert Michels (1876–1936) tends to think of the sociologist from the end. In the reception of the public, Michels appears predominantly as an elite theorist, whose classic *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*¹ of 1911 reflects his disappointment with representative democracy on the one hand, and in which, on the other hand, the “nucleus of an authoritarian understanding of politics” is laid out, which predestined him as Benito Mussolini’s (1883–1945) later Fascism apologete. This study, read as a disappointment in Michels’ former democratic hopes, would have led him ultimately from social democracy via syndicalism to Italian Fascism.² Other works and thus different strands of interpretation are largely unknown compared to *Political Parties*.

In the same year as Michels’ classic, however, another work was published, which is the focus of this article and has the potential to shake up the previous reception, namely *Sexual Ethics: A Study of Borderland Questions*.³ This “sexual-

1 Robert Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt, 1911).

2 Terry R. Kandal, “Profile: Robert Michels’ Sexual Ethics,” *Sociology* 38 (2001): 62; Arthur Mitzman, *Sociology and Estrangement: Three Sociologists of Imperial Germany* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 315.

3 In this article I quote from the German edition. The quotations have therefore been translated by me, as have the quotations from the other German books and articles listed here. Interestingly, the Italian (1912), English, and French (both 1914) editions are larger in scope than the German and were revised by Michels. It would be an exciting task to investigate the hitherto neglected revision and editing process. Robert Michels, *Die Grenzen der Geschlechtsmoral: Prolegomena – Gedanken und Untersuchungen* (Leipzig: Frauen-Verlag, 1911); Idem, *Sexual Ethics: A Study of Borderland Questions* (New York: Walter Scott, 1914); Idem, *Amour et Chasteté. Essais Sociologique* (Paris: Siard & Brière, 1914); Idem, *I Limiti della Morale Sessuale: Prolegomena: Indagini e Pensieri* (Torino: Bocca, 1914).

reform educational pamphlet”⁴ goes beyond the previous limits of Michels’ interpretation. While the *Political Parties*, as Timm Genett emphasizes in opposition to well-trodden paths of reception, presented itself as an effort to reform democracy by critically describing how it functions,⁵ the reformist will to shape and progress optimism in *Sexual Ethics* is obvious.

The latter writing has received little attention so far. The US sociologist Terry R. Kandal is a notable exception and has been studying Michels’ thinking on the “woman question”⁶ in the context of classical sociological theory since the end of the 1980s.⁷ At the same time, probably only the Italian Pino Ferraris was dealing with Michels’ work in the area of gender relations, but it was not widely received due to language barriers.⁸ Two years after the turn of the millennium, Michels’ writing was re-edited in English with an introduction by Kandal.⁹

Particularly in Germany, where Michels was refused a professorship despite the protection of Max Weber (1864–1920) because of his commitment to social democracy,¹⁰ research punished his work for a long time with the extremely one-sided perception of an elite theorist with a musty political connotation. We owe the most fundamental attempt at an overall interpretation of Michels’ work and development to the German political scientist Genett, who presents the Italian-by-choice as a “pioneer of social movement research” and thus breaks

4 Timm Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege: Zur politischen Theorie und Biographie von Robert Michels 1876–1936* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008), 43.

5 Ibid., 21–22.

6 The “women’s question” appeared in public discourse in the mid-19th century and was initially understood by contemporaries primarily as a component of the social question. Under the term, a bundle of issues was negotiated that affected gender relations. Among them were the situation of single and married women, women’s work, sexuality, and political rights for the female sex. Lucy Delap, “The ‘Woman Question’ and the Origins of Feminism,” in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 319–348.

7 Terry R. Kandal, *The Woman Question in Classical Sociology Theory* (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1988), 201–211.

8 Pino Ferraris, “Questione femminile e morale sessuale nell’evoluzione politica di Roberto Michels,” in Roberto Michels, *Economia – Sociologia – Politica*, ed. Riccardo Faucci (Torino: Giapichelli 1989), 97–122.

9 Terry R. Kandal, “From Egalitarian Sexual Ethics to Gender Politics: An Evaluation of Michels’ Contribution,” in Robert Michels, *Sexual Ethics: A Study of Borderline Questions*, with a new introduction by Terry R. Kandal (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), XI–LXV.

10 Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 1866–1918*, vol. 1: *Arbeitswelt und Bürgergeist* (Munich: Beck, 1991), 575.

with the hitherto established lines of interpretation.¹¹ In Michels’ early work, the women’s movement would stand on an equal footing with the labor and national autonomy movement.¹²

In this narrative, *Sexual Ethics* occupies a central place. As a result of the early creative phase, according to Genett, these serve as a “key to understanding Michels’ main sociological work.”¹³ Kandal’s thesis, according to which Michels’ writings on gender relations in the period from 1903 to 1913 ran roughly parallel to the development of his sociological views, already had a similar thrust.¹⁴ In Germany, in addition to Genett’s research, political scientists Harald Bluhm and Skadi S. Krause have referred, at least in passing, to *Sexual Ethics*.¹⁵ The Swiss historian Caroline Arni went into this in more detail in her account of the modern discourse on love.¹⁶ More recently, Hans Geske placed the question of gender relations in Michels’ work at the center of his Master’s thesis, thus presenting the most detailed discussion of *Sexual Ethics* in the German-speaking world, alongside that of Genett.¹⁷

The present chapter does not attempt an overall interpretation of Michels’ work. Instead, it focuses on the contribution and location of *Sexual Ethics* in the discourse on “new sexual morality” in the German Empire. A more detailed, contextualizing examination of Michels’ critique of bourgeois marriage and sexual morality, as well as his journalistic commitment to the German women’s movements, would be able to better classify and understand the ideas set out in *Sexual Ethics*. My argument is that Michels’ concept of a “new sexual morality” can be interpreted as an egalitarian-feminist reaction to the transformation of the gender order in modernity. His ideas for the reorganization of gender rela-

11 Timm Genett, “Robert Michels. Pionier der sozialen Bewegungsforschung,” in *Soziale Bewegungen zwischen Dynamik und Erstarrung*, ed. Timm Genett (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008), 11–69; Timm Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege*, 43–80.

12 Genett, “Robert Michels,” 36.

13 Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege*, 44.

14 Kandal, “Profile,” 65.

15 Harald Bluhm and Skadi S. Krause, “Einleitung: Robert Michels’ Soziologie des Parteiwesens: Oligarchien und Eliten – Die Kehrseiten moderner Demokratie,” in *Robert Michels’ Soziologie des Parteiwesens*, eds. Harald Bluhm and Skadi S. Krause (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2012), 11.

16 Caroline Arni, “Seelengesetze mit Gesellschaftswert: Weibliche Subjektwerdung und die Utopie menschlicher Perfektion in der feministisch-sexualreformerischen Liebesethik um 1900,” *Feministische Studien* 27, no. 2 (2009): 196–209; Caroline Arni, “L’Amour en Europe: Ein Versuch über Robert Michels’ vergleichende Liebeswissenschaft und den Liebesdiskurs in der Moderne,” in *Der Eigensinn des Materials: Erkundungen sozialer Wirklichkeit: Festschrift für Claudia Honegger zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Caroline Arni (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2007), 71–89.

17 For a condensed version, see Hans Geske, “Oligarchie, Faschismus ... Feminismus? Ein neuer Blick auf Robert Michels,” *Berliner Debatte Initial* 31, no. 3 (2020): 99–109.

tions distinguish Michels as a border crosser between the radical factions of the reform movement of the German Empire.¹⁸

A Preliminary Classification Attempt

Sexual Ethics can be read as a flaming plea for a “new sexual morality ... whose sun is already seen above the horizon, but whose rays are still pale and weak, and lack sufficient force to arouse a new moral life.”¹⁹ According to Caroline Arni, the concept presented by Michels is both utopia and program at the same time, which characterizes utopian thinking in modernity. After 1800, utopia had become a program waiting to be realized “and in this way inscribed in the present as an orientation for action.”²⁰ The basic features of Michels’ vision are exemplary for “a conception of the heterosexual couple that was developed around 1900 in the context of sexual-reformist feminist thinking.” At its center is the love relationship based on autonomy (voluntary love) and equality (comradeship), which “realizes the ethical potential of humanity.”²¹

In the context of “sexual-reformist feminist thinking” at the turn of the century, Michels’ basic concept was therefore not an isolated phenomenon. In general, according to Thomas Nipperdey (1927–1992), the turn of the century could be described as the beginning of the “sexual revolution of the 20th century.”²² Nevertheless, only a tiny minority at that time advocated a reform of sexual morality, which was rejected by large parts of the bourgeois women’s movement, as it would endanger the bourgeois family and thus the foundations of bourgeois so-

18 It is no coincidence that Michels first joined the Italian Socialist Party at the beginning of the 20th century and then the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). For the latter he had even been elected delegate for the party congresses by the Magdeburg SPD from 1903 to 1905. In this context, he also took part in the Social Democratic Women’s Conference in Bremen in 1904. *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Abgehalten zu Bremen vom 18. bis 24. September 1904* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1904), 342–344. Social Democracy was the natural choice for Michels, as it had taken over the historical task of reactionary German liberalism. Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege*, 32. This view was generally shared by the SPD. Richard Evans, *Sozialdemokratie und Frauenbewegung im deutschen Kaiserreich* (Bonn: Dietz, 1979), 98.

19 Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 55.

20 Arni, “Liebesethik,” 196.

21 *Ibid.*, 196–197.

22 Nipperdey, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 104.

ciety.²³ The importance that Michels and his feminist comrades-in-arms assigned to sexual morality, which also explains the almost hostile attitude of the majority society of the German Empire, is rooted in the transformation processes of modernity, often perceived as a danger and crisis. In this modern reorganization of social conditions, gender relations took a central position, the patriarchal character of which was defended to the hilt by some, reformed tentatively by others, and fundamentally challenged by a few.

This sexual reform discourse can be classified as part of the “woman question,” which, driven by the political and economic developments of the modern age and the commitment of the women’s movement at the turn of the century, had advanced far into the German public sphere. “The woman’s question, when we consider its historical foundation, the diversity of its social, intellectual, and economic aspects,” says Michels, “must be recognised as being no fairy tale to occupy the energies of a few unbalanced women, but a most serious problem, whose solution demands the coordinated efforts of the best.”²⁴ One dimension of the “woman question,” in which gender relations were generally contended with, is the aspect of sexuality, which in contemporary times could not be discussed without talking about marriage.

Sexual Ethics was published in 1911 by Frauen-Verlag²⁵ and appeared in the same year in the second and, to date, last German edition.²⁶ In the foreword, Mi-

23 Most representatives of the bourgeois women’s movement limited themselves in the marriage discussion to the demand for reforms in divorce and property law.

24 Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 133.

25 The same publishing house also published the monthly journal *Frauen-Zukunft*, edited by Gabriele von Lieber (life data unknown), Meta Hammerschlag (1864–1954), and Hanns Dorn (1878–1934), which appeared from 1910 to 1912 and in which Michels published a lengthy article on Neo-Malthusianism one year before *Sexual Ethics*. Robert Michels, “Neomalthusianismus,” *Frauenzukunft* 1, no. 1 (1910): 42–55.

26 Until now, knowledge about the history of the edition was limited to the year of publication and the publisher. By analyzing parts of Michels’ correspondence, which is kept in the Robert Michels Archive of the Luigi Einaudi Foundation in Turin, it is possible to reconstruct a piece of the buried history of the edition. Michels pursued the idea for the work from the spring of 1909 at the latest, as is clear from a letter from Helene Stöcker to Michels dated June 22 of the same year. On February 3, 1910, he received a reply from the publisher Gabriela von Lieber, to whom Michels must have submitted an offer of publication, including a project outline, in the meantime. Lieber agreed to publish the book in Frauen-Verlag. The following year, *Sexual Ethics* was published in an edition of 1,000 copies. In the same year, another edition of 1,000 copies followed, which had almost sold out by the beginning of 1915, as Lieber informs Michels in a letter dated February 22, 1915. “If the war had not intervened now, I would have tackled the 3rd thousand without further ado,” Lieber writes. However, she had to refrain from an “undertaking that was not immediately profitable” due to the current circumstances. Lieber did encour-

chels openly admits that the book is the “result of many years of observation by a man who has given much and serious thought to the sexual problems of his youngest youth.” In Italy, France, and Germany, he encountered everywhere “the same unsolvable problem ... of reconciling young love with old customs.” Michels’ descriptions “are not strictly scientific” but, he hopes, “not devoid of scientific importance.” It was not written for those who have already solved the “problems of sexual morality” on the basis of some “preconceived dogma,” but instead the premise of the book is based on the recognition of its unsolved nature. At the same time, Michels explicitly distinguishes himself from other works in this field, since he has drawn the conclusion from his work with “borderland problems” that “more questions should be asked than answered, more problems should be posed than solved.”²⁷

The term “borderland problems” plays a central role in the work. In the field of sexuality, according to Michels, it is, “to say the least, nonsense ... to speak of ‘abysses,’ where there are only gentle transitions and fine nuances.”²⁸ He accordingly refuses to accept sexual morals that operate with a black and white contrast.²⁹ The criticism of bourgeois double morals, which would regard women as whores at night and saints during the day,³⁰ forms a main strand of *Sexual Ethics*. However, Michels addresses a wide range of issues in addition to sexual morals in general: prostitution, pornography, sexual education, contraception, bridal morality (*Brautstandsmoral*), and the fundamental relationship between the sexes inside and outside of marriage. On the other hand, Michels omits the issue of women’s suffrage in his book, which was decidedly political and virulent at the time.³¹

Michels leaves no doubt about his fundamental perspective: on the one hand, he rejects the form of the monogamous, inseparable family as a “state institution of coercion,” but on the other hand, he recognizes in it a “moral goal”

age Michels to tackle a new edition himself as a “popular edition” [*Volksausgabe*] at a favorable retail price, but, as is known, a third German edition did not come about. Helene Stöcker to Robert Michels, June 22, 1909; Gabriele von Lieber to Robert Michels, February 3, 1910; Gabriele von Lieber to Robert Michels, February 22, 1915. All letters from the Robert Michels Archive of the Luigi Einaudi Foundation, Turin.

²⁷ All quotes in the paragraph from Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, VII, VIII and X.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 63–64.

²⁹ Robert Michels, “Die Zwischenstufen der Ehrbarkeit,” *Die neue Generation* 2, no. 9 (1909): 351–359.

³⁰ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 146.

³¹ In his journalism at the beginning of the 20th century, Michels publicly advocated for women’s suffrage with determination. Robert Michels, “Frauenstimmrecht – schon heute eine Notwendigkeit,” *Die Frauenbewegung* 8, no. 23 (1902): 177–178.

that “will certainly never be achieved, but whose pursuit is at the same time in the individual and collective interest of humanity.”³² The very structure of the work is divided into four parts: 1) general borderland problems of erotic life, 2) borderland problems of the extra-conjugal erotic life, 3) pre-conjugal borderland problems, and finally 4) borderland problems of the conjugal sexual life. Genett is correct in highlighting that this structure signals “the goal of Michels’ sex education: to give marriage a new legitimacy as a monogamous alliance for life.”³³ Marriage, according to Michels, is “reformable but not abolishable.”³⁴ Nevertheless, he recognizes the “polygamous dispositions” of human beings as an anthropological premise and compares the sex drive with a physical need, the “feeling of hunger.”³⁵ Michels thus finds (not only) himself in a “good” social democratic tradition, since August Bebel (1840–1913) had already used the metaphor of food to refer to the naturalness of sexual needs in his classic *Woman and Socialism* published in 1879.³⁶

Michels had been working on the “woman question” since the beginning of the 20th century. The first essays on this subject date back to 1901, and a large number of articles were published in various periodicals of the women’s movement in the years before *Sexual Ethics*. Some of them were included to a greater extent in Michels’ monograph, which he describes in varying degrees of detail. In his journalistic offensive, the sociologist, who received his doctorate in 1900 in Halle, felt no shyness whatsoever toward any of the various wings of the German women’s movement—excluding the patriotic women’s associations. He published in *Die Frau* [The Woman],³⁷ edited by Helene Lange (1848–1930), as a representative of the “moderate” bourgeois women’s movement, as well as in the papers of the “radical” bourgeois wing of the movement, including *Die Frauenbewegung* [The Women’s Movement],³⁸ edited by Lily Braun (1865–1916) and Minna Cauer (1841–1922), and the journal *Mutterschutz: Zeitschrift zur Re-*

32 Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, VIII.

33 Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege*, 65.

34 Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 128.

35 Ibid., 11.

36 Bebel’s book was of course known to Michels, who both mentioned it in the footnotes of his *Sexual Ethics* and had already reviewed it positively in 1904 for *Die Gleichheit*. Robert Michels, “Der vierundreißigste Bebel,” *Die Gleichheit* 14, no. 15 (1904): 113–115; August Bebel, “Die Frau und der Sozialismus,” in *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, vol. 10, ed. Internationales Institut für Sozialgeschichte Amsterdam (Munich: K. G. Sauer, 1996 [1879]).

37 Among others, see Robert Michels, “Die Arbeiterinnenbewegung in Italien,” *Die Frau* 10, no. 6 (1902): 328–336.

38 Among others, see Robert Michels, “Entstehung der Frauenfrage als soziale Frage,” *Die Frauenbewegung* 9, no. 3 (1903): 17–18.

form der Sexuellen Ethik [Maternity Protection: Journal for the Reform of Sexual Ethics],³⁹ renamed *Die neue Generation* [The New Generation]⁴⁰ in 1908 under the editorship of Helene Stöcker (1869–1943). In quantitative terms, however, Michels wrote the most in the proletarian women's magazine *Die Gleichheit* [The Equality], run by Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), which was characteristically and almost exclusively about the Italian women's movement and not about questions of sexual morality.⁴¹ Moreover, Michels was very familiar with the literature of the women's movement of his time, as is impressively demonstrated by some of his reviews and references.⁴²

Michels also corresponded with activists from all factions of the German women's movement.⁴³ However, his longest and most intensive contact was with sex reformer Helene Stöcker, as can be seen from the correspondence with her, some of which has survived. While many other contacts broke off around 1910, the two continued to be in contact. Michels had asked Stöcker as late as 1923 if she would speak at one of his seminars.⁴⁴ This makes clear that the field of sexual morality gained in importance for Michels over the years in comparison to the other aspects of the women's question. That development can also be explained by Michels' sociological interest in these issues, which is why he published all other editions in sociological series except for the German edition of *Sexual Ethics*.⁴⁵

Michels' preoccupation with gender relations flattened noticeably after the publication of *Sexual Ethics*. The separate foreword to the 1914 English edition, which Michels also enriched with a separate chapter on sex education for children, probably formed a provisional conclusion to his work, underlining his sex-

39 Robert Michels, " Erotische Streifzüge: Deutsche und italienische Liebesformen. Aus dem Pariser Liebesleben," *Mutterschutz* 2, no. 9 (1906): 362–374.

40 Among others, see Robert Michels, "Ein sexueller Kongreß in Italien," *Die neue Generation* 4, no. 2 (1911): 63–70.

41 Among others, see Robert Michels, "Rückblick auf die Geschichte der proletarischen Frauenbewegung in Italien," *Die Gleichheit* 13, no. 1: 2–3; no. 2: 11–13; no. 5: 36–38; no. 8: 58–60; no. 11: 83–85; no. 17: 131–134 (all 1903).

42 Robert Michels, "Die deutsche Frau im Beruf," *Die Gleichheit* 14, no. 11 (1904): 82–84; Robert Michels, "Das Weib und der Intellectualismus," *Dokumente der Frauen* 4, no. 4 (1902): 106–114.

43 The inventory list of Michels' correspondence from the already mentioned archive of the Luigi Einaudi Foundation in Turin is like a who's who of the German women's and workers' movements.

44 Helene Stöcker to Robert Michels, May 7, 1923, Robert Michels Archive of the Luigi Einaudi Foundation, Turin.

45 While the German edition was published by a women's movement publishing house, all other editions were published in sociological series: Piccola biblioteca di scienze moderne, Bibliothèque Sociologique Internationale, and The Contemporary Science Series.

ual education claim.⁴⁶ At the end of the 1920s, however, he once again took up the “study of borderland problems,” as he himself noticed.⁴⁷ At the center of Michels’ later work is the topic of moral statistics as a problematic basis for statements on sexual morality, which was also a component of his early work. In a footnote, Genett makes the succinct remark that the “normative impulse of sexual reform” is completely lost in the later writings. This is true, but if one takes a closer look at the monograph *Sittlichkeit in Ziffern?* [*Morality in Figures?*], it could just as well be classified as a fulsome sociology of sexual morality or sociological sexology, the analysis of which must remain the subject of future work.⁴⁸

Michels was in demand as a discussion partner in the field of sexuality, and he had discussions on this subject with Werner Sombart (1863–1941) and Max Weber and his children, among others.⁴⁹ The nascent sociology or some of its early representatives recognized the significance of changing gender relations in modernity and became partly involved in the reform movement of the empire. Max Weber’s wife, Marianne Weber (1870–1954), was herself active in the bourgeois women’s movement, and both of them, like other respected intellectuals, initially supported Helene Stöcker’s *Bund für Mutterschutz* [*Association for Maternity Protection*] in its efforts to strengthen the rights of illegitimate children and unmarried mothers. However, none of the classics of early sociology dealt with the relationship between the sexes as intensively as Robert Michels, whose sociological view characterizes his descriptions.⁵⁰ His studies are thus not only to be understood as “criticism in the melee” (*Kritik im Handgemenge*) but also follow a scientific interest.

These first contextualizing highlights were intended to illustrate that Michels’ *Sexual Ethics* oscillate in their determination of origin between the women’s movement, social democracy, and sociology—between political influence and scientific knowledge gain. In the following, I will limit myself to two aspects of Michels’ remarks: 1) the criticism of bridal morality and 2) the criticism of bourgeois marriage, which are finally more precisely located in the social democratic and feminist discourse of the German Empire.

⁴⁶ Geske, “Ein neuer Blick,” 107.

⁴⁷ Robert Michels, *Sittlichkeit in Ziffern? Kritik der Moralstatistik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1928), V.

⁴⁸ Robert Michels, “Altes und Neues zum Problem der Moralstatistik (Kritik der Geschlechts-moralstatistik),” *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 57, no. 2 (1927): 417–469 and 701–745.

⁴⁹ Andrew Bonnell, “Robert Michels, Max Weber, and the Sexual Question,” *The European Legacy* 3, no. 6 (1998): 97–105.

⁵⁰ Kandal, *The Woman Question*, 201–211.

Bridal Morality: Critique of a Primitive Rite

In a brochure dating from 1904, Michels wrote that “among all the different components of our current concept of morality ... bridal morality is the most fragile, rotten and abnormal.”⁵¹ Bridal morality refers to the social conventions that are imposed on two fiancées until marriage. The basic principle here is chastity. Although the example of bridal morals is somewhat extravagant, bourgeois double standards have been at the center of the moral movement (*Sittlichkeitsbewegung*) since the 1890s, subjecting prostitution to a fundamental critique.⁵² The fundamental critique of bourgeois sexual morals, which Michels carries out with great perspicacity, could, as Genett points out, have had a biographical background. Michels’ first daughter, Italia, was born in August 1900 in a small town in northern Italy, but she died just four months later. The date of birth is only three months after marriage, which is a scandal in bourgeois circles because it breaks the pre-conjugal rule of sexual abstinence.⁵³

Michels’ criticism of bridal morals is quite impressive in terms of the methodological approach that runs through his work in the field of gender relations. The analysis is characterized by a mixture of class analysis and cultural variation, as Kandal generally notes for Michels’ work in this field.⁵⁴ In the case of bridal morality, Michels judges that the customs are strictest in those countries that have remained closest to the “medieval customs.” Among these, he counts

51 Robert Michels, *Brautstandsmoral: Eine kritische Betrachtung* (Leipzig: Magazin Verlag, 1904), 3. The dating of the booklet is not very easy, as both Robert Michels himself and Timm Genett date it to the year 1906. A version that has been digitized in the meantime, on the other hand, dates from 1904 and is already in its 5th edition. In a letter from Helene Stöcker, however, we learn that the text was originally intended for the *Frauen-Rundschau* but was rejected by Stöcker because it was too sharp in form and expression for the “women’s audience.” As a result, Michels came up with the idea of publishing the text as a booklet in May 1903. It is possible that it was published later that year, or in 1904 at the latest. However, at the beginning of 1904, the authorities confiscated the booklet on the grounds that it violated morality. The public prosecutor wanted to put Michels on trial. Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to determine whether a trial actually took place and what the outcome of this incident was. Obviously, the booklet was not taken out of circulation in the long run. Helene Stöcker to Robert Michels, 13.5.1903, 12.6.1903, 17.2.1904, 19.5.1904, Robert Michels Archive of the Luigi Einaudi Foundation, Turin.

52 Briatte Anne-Laure, *Bevormundete Staatsbürgerinnen: Die ‘radikale’ Frauenbewegung im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2020), 103–115; Anette Dietrich, *Weißes Weiblichkeit: Konstruktionen von “Rasse” und Geschlecht im deutschen Kolonialismus* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007), 313–319.

53 Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege*, 165.

54 Kandal, *The Sexual Question*, 208.

Germany, Italy, France, and the countries of the Austrian monarchy. In Holland, England, and North America, the “conditions are not quite so sad.” Beyond this cultural component, Michels points to the “two moral worlds,” whose border is class difference. The “dominion” of bridal morality, he says, extends only to the aristocratic, bourgeois, and petty-bourgeois bourgeois. The proletariat remains largely unaffected by the “regulations of sexuality.”⁵⁵

In Michels’ work, the criticism of bridal morality presents itself as an implicit critique of a primitive rite, which is a modern anachronism. The three-phase model of the religious rite developed by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) in 1909, which is still used in anthropological research today, can serve as an analytical framework for the analysis of Michels’ descriptions.⁵⁶ Gennep starts his analysis from the assumption that transitions are of great importance in all human societies. In this case, bridal morality would be a form of social transition to a different social status, that of wife and husband. The social boundaries broken down during the transition are a potential danger to society and are therefore accompanied by rituals “whose function is to restore the temporarily broken down boundaries and to confirm the traditional structure.”⁵⁷ Gennep says that there is a regular sequence of three phases in transition rituals, which will be traced below in the light of Michels’ comments on bridal morality.

The first phase is that of separation from the old status, which is carried out for the future bride and groom through the “act of so-called engagement.”⁵⁸ At this stage, both become “sexless beings” who must henceforth adhere to a new morality, the bridal morality and the basic principle of sexual abstinence associated with it. This is followed by the threshold and transformation phase, the second phase of the rite of passage. In this phase of interregnum, the bride and groom belong to neither the old nor the new status. Here the couple is exposed to a kind of “spy system”⁵⁹ in which parents, relatives, friends, and sometimes even servants ensure that the couple do not get too close and are never alone together. In the following period of preparation for the wedding, the couple must carry out or endure a series of practices until the night of the wedding. Central to this is the “furnishing of the young woman,” who is dressed in white linen, fine lace, and bright colors. When the groom visits the bride, he is con-

⁵⁵ Michels, *Brautstandsmoral*, 7–8.

⁵⁶ Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris: Deschamps, 1909). See also Roland Mischung, “Religionsethnologie,” in *Ethnologie: Einführung und Überblick*, eds. Bettina Beer and Hans Fischer (Berlin: Reimer, 2012), 230–234.

⁵⁷ Mischung, “Religionsethnologie,” 231.

⁵⁸ Michels, *Brautstandsmoral*, 5.

⁵⁹ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 118.

fronted with the whole “mysterious apparatus” which serves to “hide human nudity and which, precisely for this reason, arouses so much desire and promises feelings of lust.”⁶⁰

On the wedding day, the “execution of the bridal morality” comes to an end after a long procedure in which the bride and groom first have to perform the ceremony at the registry office, then that in the church, and finally that of the banquet. “At the end of the long series of humiliations, they are thrown into each other’s arms quite beastly.”⁶¹ The third and final phase is the integration phase, in which the rights and duties of the new social position are accepted and which in this case is completed by the wedding night. At the end of this phase there is a socially “made” couple, who from then on have to comply with their rights and duties as defined by the hegemonic bourgeois sexual morality.

Michels openly admits that he feels a “disgust” for this kind of morality. A “‘morality’ whose immorality we unfortunately no longer notice because of the tiresome habit of seeing it before us every day.” The criticism focuses on bourgeois double morality, which, although it puts the “chastity of the bride” above all else, does not prevent the mother of the bride from “inquiring very brutally about the day when she will be able to lose her,” before setting the date of the wedding. According to Michels, who sees the height of immorality in the fact that the bride is “not only allowed to connect sexually, but even has to connect sexually on the night of the wedding,”⁶² the “transition in the pleasure of love” from prohibition to compulsion is a traumatizing event for a majority of young brides, which for some women “almost feels like rape.”⁶³ The interrelation between rape and power, which establishes a hierarchy and dominance beyond sexualized violence, remains under-theorized by Michels.

The class character of bridal morality is obvious. Only a few working women had no sexual experience before marriage, because “the maintenance of virginity is a result of constant surveillance and satisfactory housing conditions. The female worker possesses neither one nor the other.”⁶⁴ However, proletarian sexual morals do not presuppose the virginity of the bride either. It would not be considered immoral in the proletarian milieu for the fiancées to already live to-

⁶⁰ Michels, *Brautstandsmoral*, 11–12.

⁶¹ Ibid., 13.

⁶² All four quotations *ibid.*, 10–11 and 13–14..

⁶³ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 122–123.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 65.

gether. In most cases, premarital children are also considered acceptable.⁶⁵ In an early article published by Michels in 1903 in *Die Neue Zeit*, the theory journal of the Social Democratic Party, he even went so far as to claim that “morality in the lower classes is far more natural and for this reason alone is truly moral.”⁶⁶ In the following years, Michels somewhat reduced this normative-idealizing impetus of a proletarian counter-model of sexual morality in favor of more sober descriptions, although his sympathy remained obvious. Thus, he counters the trauma of the wedding night with the idea of a “gradual evolution” of sexual life.⁶⁷ Although this is only intended for those couples who actually intend to marry, Michels nevertheless detaches sexuality from an exclusive tie to conjugal status. The process of getting to know each other can also include the result, which in Michels’ case sounds rather implicit, of denying a couple the ability to marry each other on the basis of the experiences made and of separating again.

Genett’s assessment is that, in Michels’ early works, the scientific interest in questioning customs and morals for their implicit meaning seems only to be limited in relation to bridal morality.⁶⁸ The implicit meaning of bridal morality remains largely hidden in Michels’ phenomenological description. He explicitly excludes the causes of its emergence, which he locates both ethically and economically.⁶⁹ Instead, Michels uses the presentation and criticism of bridal morality as an opportunity to demonstrate the “primitive state” of bourgeois sexual morality and to call for a fundamental revision of it.⁷⁰

65 Robert Michels, “Beitrag zum Problem der Moral,” *Die neue Zeit: Wochenschrift der deutschen Sozialdemokratie* 1, no. 15 (1903): 471–472.

66 *Ibid.*, 472.

67 Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 124.

68 Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege*, 57.

69 In his book *The Origin of the Family*, Friedrich Engels does not criticize bourgeois bridal morals, but his comments offer an economic explanation for this rite. While the groom is by no means subject to strict monogamy before the engagement, as Michels himself notes, for women of the bourgeoisie abstinence applies both before and during the engagement. Sexuality is granted to her after marriage only with her husband. For the woman, abstinence transfers itself into strict monogamy. With Engels it could be argued that this strict sexual discipline of the wife is intended to ensure that the husband can be sure of his possible paternity so that the inheritance is only passed on to legitimate descendants. Friedrich Engels, “Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats,” in *Marx-Engels-Werke* (henceforth *MEW*), vol. 21 (Berlin: Dietz, 1962 [1884]), 25–173.

70 Michels, *Bräutstandsmoral*, 20.

Individual and Collective Scope for Action in Marriage

“The old marriage bleeds from a thousand wounds,” says Michels, “which a criticism as astute as it is unrelenting has beaten into it.”⁷¹ Michels presses hard into this open wound. In the first article after his dissertation, he also deals with patriarchal marriage law, which was manifested in the German Empire by the Civil Code that came into force in 1900 and was the subject of criticism from the women’s movements and social democracy.⁷² However, Michels did not express his criticism in a German journal but in the Italian *Riforma Sociale*.⁷³ In it, Michels complained, among other things, of the disregard for women as “independent personalities in state and society” codified in marriage law.⁷⁴ In *Sexual Ethics*, he also judged that marriage was basically an “officially licensed breeding ground” (*offiziell konzessionierte Notzuchtanstalt*), since it was based on the conjugal duty of sexual coercion. The husband can correct the grievance of this “legal situation” through his individual conduct.⁷⁵

In Michels’ reform discourse on marriage, there are at least three dimensions. The first two are the legal and material dimensions. The gender inequality manifested in the legal situation must be reduced, but the legal debate is not a focal point in Michels’ work. He also only marginally discusses economic issues, though this does not mean that he does not attach importance to them. Instead, Michels focuses on the individual dimension, which includes aspects of sexuality, bringing up children, the general relationship between the married couple, and the domestic division of labor. This emphasis points to the enlightening character of the book, which points individuals to their own scope and possibilities for action within the existing order, the exhaustion of which can contribute to a happier marriage.

Before Michels’ proposals in the following part are located in the discourse of the social democracy and women’s movement of the German Empire, a few aspects of internal marriage should be particularly emphasized, which Michels

⁷¹ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 127.

⁷² Angelika Schaser, “Geschlecht strukturiert die Welt: Die Bedeutung des 19. Jahrhunderts für die Permanenz der Geschlechterhierarchie,” in *Durchbruch der Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Birgit Aschmann (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2019), 186–191; Evans, *Sozialdemokratie und Frauenbewegung*, 99–100.

⁷³ Due to my lack of language skills, this article can only be received through Timm Genett.

⁷⁴ Robert Michels quoted after Genett, *Der Fremde im Krieg*, 59.

⁷⁵ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 128.

discusses in detail in the last section of his book. For him, love is linked to sexuality: “Sexless love, whether in marriage or outside it, is stale and shallow.”⁷⁶ The man would have a predisposition to polygamy, which can be a reason for infidelity. The woman, on the other hand, is not monogamous but “only” polyandrous. The greatest possible variance and passion in sexual intercourse reduces the probability of male infidelity.⁷⁷ Here it becomes clear what great importance Michels attaches to a sexually fulfilled married life, which he decouples from its purely reproductive purpose: “We must have the courage to confess that we love love and its ecstasy for its own sake.”⁷⁸ According to Michels, in order to avoid any misunderstanding, the woman also had sexual needs, which were, however, denied to her by the Victorian sexual morals prevailing at the time.⁷⁹

A major problem, which Michels had already emphasized in his criticism of bridal morals, is the lack of the gradual development of marriage. The bride is pushed almost seamlessly from the assumed virgin state into motherhood. A pregnancy in marriage usually occurs after the honeymoon. “Pregnancy, however, means an increasing reduction in the ability to enjoy life.”⁸⁰ The married couple, who have hardly come closer to each other because of the bridal morals, cannot spend time together in exuberance during early pregnancy, and this would cloud the young marital happiness from the beginning. An important need of marriage is thus blocked from the very start: “In the first years of marriage, the husband initially unconsciously seeks his wife as a companion and comrade as well as his lover.”⁸¹ Instead, the young mother is torn in the “eternal three-part struggle between mother’s duties and husband’s duties and the woman’s duties towards herself.”⁸²

This fate needed not be an inevitable one. Michels, on the other hand, sets out the guiding principle that “every man and woman has the right to prevent the procreation of children without renouncing physical love in any way.”⁸³ Here Michels represents a radical democratic ideal of equality, which he applies to gender relations.⁸⁴ In order to realize this right, he advocates, among other things, Neo-Malthusianism (contraceptives), which also was a highly controver-

⁷⁶ Ibid., 146.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 155.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 176.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 188.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 163.

⁸¹ Ibid., 164.

⁸² Ibid., 165.

⁸³ Ibid., 167.

⁸⁴ Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege*, 63.

sial issue in the social democratic and women's movements at the time.⁸⁵ Although this is unnatural, an argument that was often used against contraceptives, all cultural achievements in the field of health education have this in themselves, according to Michels. "Neo-Malthusianism is a victory of human reason over animal irrationality."⁸⁶

The "right not to have children" or conscious child planning would have several advantages. It could give the married couple time to live out their young happiness. Moreover, it would be a way for workers to escape the threat of poverty that a high number of children entails. Michels observes that a falling birth rate goes hand in hand with growing prosperity. This would also help to avoid "artificial abortions and infanticide, which are punishable everywhere."⁸⁷ Michels describes abortion as "excusable" due to the precarious situation of working-class families but does not advocate the right to abortion. The possibility of contraception would prevent this. However, the contraceptive methods would have to become even better for this purpose, as they did not completely rule out pregnancy.⁸⁸ Social Darwinist motives, which also increased in parts of the women's movement into racial hygiene variants of eugenics, play only a marginal role for Michels and should not be overrated.⁸⁹ For Michels, the reduction in the number of children or child planning has primarily private reasons, and beyond this also economic and moral reasons, but is in the end a purely "technical question."

Of fundamental importance to Michels was the general relationship between the married couple. A large majority of men would discourage the wife from developing her intellectual capacities and limit her professional development, a fact rooted in the "well-known general views on the duties of the wife as a housewife and mother, which are commonplace in the bourgeoisie of each country." If the woman is in gainful employment, she must at least not overshadow

⁸⁵ Contraceptives were rejected by leading social democrats such as August Bebel, Clara Zetkin, and Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) during the "birth strike debate" just before the First World War. Karl Kautsky, on the other hand, had taken an affirmative position on contraceptives since at least 1880, but he remained an exception in the party. However, the party position changed tentatively as a result of the "birth strike debate," as birth control was obviously a need of the working class. Evans, *Sozialdemokratie und Frauenbewegung*, 244–250.

⁸⁶ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 180.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 178–179.

⁸⁹ On racial hygiene discourses in the bourgeois women's movement, see Dietrich, *Weisse Weiblichkeiten*, 327–341. On forms of socialist eugenics, see Michael Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik. Eugenische Sozialtechnologien in Debatten und Politik der deutschen Sozialdemokratie 1890–1933* (Bonn: Dietz, 1995).

the work and fame of the man. “The intellectualism of women is thus in many cases already limited by the egoism of men,”⁹⁰ which has led to the fact that there are relatively few intellectual women. At least it is not due to the supposed lack of female abilities or the corrupting effect of culture on the female sex, as some “male bluestockings” (*männliche Blaustrümpfe*) would claim.⁹¹

In reality, according to Michels, women are “far from being as different from men as the fanatical stagnators or backwarders of our social order imagine them to be.”⁹² In this way, Michels resolutely opposes the prevailing notion of bi-polar gender characters.⁹³ Gender inequality, on the other hand, would result, in addition to the egoism of men, from the double burden on women, which limits their scope for action. Thus, full employment makes it impossible to fulfill one’s maternal duties, as Michels emphasizes in reference to a work by Marianne Weber. Nevertheless, both parties had parental duties to fulfill, which were by no means limited to the mother.

In counteracting this situation, Michels pleads—explicitly following Clara Zetkin—for a fairer division of labor in the household and in bringing up children in order to free women from their “inner struggle.” Such a division of labor would not only facilitate the freer development of the woman, but would also broaden the husband’s world of thought and give him an insight into the woman’s “duties,” of which he had previously only had vague ideas.⁹⁴ This “idea of a domestic division of labor, especially in bringing up children, is by no means unrealisable,” says Michels.⁹⁵ This would enable the wife, but also the husband, to fulfill their duties toward their children, toward their spouse, and toward themselves.

In these statements, the individual development of the personality is at the center of Michels’ argumentation, which is not only in the interest of the wife, who has been limited in her abilities up to now, but is also important for the relationship between the married couple as well as for the perfection of society. In doing so, Michels follows in the tradition of John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), who had already argued in a parliamentary speech on the right to vote for women in 1867 that women would be better able to bring up children and manage the

⁹⁰ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 183.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Karin Hausen, “Die Polarisierung der ‚Geschlechtscharaktere‘. Eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben,” in *Geschlechtergeschichte als Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Karin Hausen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012 [1976]), 19–49.

⁹⁴ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 193.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

household if their intellectual development and socialization were not restricted to such an extent by society.⁹⁶ The educated woman would also be an added value for their husbands. As the couple spends a lot of time together due to the “domestic revolution,” it would damage the man’s character if the woman continued to be treated only as a “toy” or a “better servant” and not as a “conversation partner.”⁹⁷ In the end, the whole of society would suffer.

Michels leaves no doubt that marriage, despite all its shortcomings, is the “best form of sexual conviviality” and the “necessary cell of every cultural life.”⁹⁸ Michels’ aim of “healing marriage” can only be achieved by “sharpening the sense of responsibility.” Thus, on the horizon of Michels’ diagnosis of the problem, his ideal conception of the new marriage, based on individuality as well as on equal “comradeship” and a fulfilled sex life, becomes apparent. The modern or “free woman” thus endows Michels with the attributes of a “proud, self-confident, co-creative companion.”⁹⁹ Creating the legal and socio-economic framework for this was a political imperative.

Michels seems to have come quite close to the ideal of a “new marriage” with his own married life. His wife, Gisela Michels-Lindner (1878–1954), was also active in the SPD, organized a number of meetings in Marburg in 1905 at which she lectured, and in the following year also published in *Der Gleichheit* on the Italian women’s movement.¹⁰⁰ In the foreword to *Sexual Ethics*, Michels describes his wife as a “loyal comrade” as well as a “faithful and independent companion,” which is relatively congruent with the characteristics of the “new woman” he formulated and indicates that his position on the “woman question” was not limited to a theoretical discussion, but also represents an everyday practical guide. During his lifetime, Michels held fast to the ideal of marriage, even though it is not the only legitimate form of living together.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ John Stuart Mill, “Parlamentsrede über die Zulassung der Frauen zum Wahlrecht,” in *Ausgewählte Werke*, vol. 1, eds. Ulrike Ackermann and Hans Jörg Schmidt (Hamburg: Murmann, 2012), 394–395.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 128.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰⁰ Among others, see Gisela Michels-Linder, “Die sozialistische Frauenbewegung in Italien,” *Die Gleichheit* 16, no. 22 (1906): 153.

¹⁰¹ “In sexual life, early marriage entered into out of love and keeping it pure is a social ideal that transcends all time.” Michels, *Sittlichkeit in Ziffern?*, 219.

Robert Michels as a Border Crosser

The final task will be to situate Michels’ positions on sexuality and marriage in the discourse of the time and not to leave it at the references made so far. “Sexuality was not a taboo subject,” writes Ute Frevert, “but the subject of heated scientific and political controversies, not only in medical journals.”¹⁰² The subject of female sexuality as well as premarital and extramarital sexual intercourse was particularly controversial, on which, as described, Michels took a clear position. In contrast, the moral movement in the German Empire, which gained strength in the 1890s and consisted of very different political wings, devoted itself primarily to the problem of prostitution.¹⁰³ “They criticized the double morality of a society that criminalized prostitutes but left their male customers unscathed.”¹⁰⁴ More far-reaching demands for a “new sexual morality,” however, were demanded only by very few.

The avant-garde in the field of sexual reform was formed by the Association for Maternity Protection, founded in 1905 and headed by Helene Stöcker, which on the one hand wanted to improve the situation of illegitimate children and unmarried mothers and, on the other, advocated a “new sexual morality,”¹⁰⁵ which also led to conflicts within the association. On the first concern, both Max and Marianne Weber supported the association, in which Social Democrats such as August Bebel, Lily Braun, and Henriette Fürth (1861–1938) were also active.¹⁰⁶ However, the Weber family quickly distanced themselves from the association when it took a more offensive stance in favor of a reform of sexual morals. After Michels sent his article “Erotische Streifzüge” (“Erotic Forays”),¹⁰⁷ published in the association’s magazine *Mutterschutz* in 1906, to Max Weber, the latter replied quite indignantly: “The specific Mutterschutz gang is an utterly confused bunch. After the babble of Stöcker, Borgius, etc. I withdrew my support. Crass hedonism and an ethics that would benefit only men as the goal of women ... that is simply nonsense.”¹⁰⁸ The Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine (Federation of German Women’s Associations), the national umbrella organiza-

¹⁰² Ute Frevert, *Frauen-Geschichte: Zwischen bürgerlicher Verbesserung und neuer Weiblichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 128.

¹⁰³ Briatte, *Bevormundete Staatsbürgerinnen*, 103–116.

¹⁰⁴ Frevert, *Frauen-Geschichte*, 132.

¹⁰⁵ Briatte, *Bevormundete Staatsbürgerinnen*, 197.

¹⁰⁶ Manfred Scharinger, *Proletarische Frauenbewegung: Kritische Bilanz und politische Lehren* (Vienna: RSO, 2009), 433.

¹⁰⁷ Michels, “Erotische Streifzüge,” 362–374.

¹⁰⁸ Max Weber quoted after Bonnell, “Sexual Question,” 99.

tion of the civil women's movement in Germany, also refused to accept the Association for Maternity Protection because of its "radical" positions.

Within *Sexual Ethics*, Michels advocates a "new sexual morality," but he clearly distances himself from the discourse of "free love." "Free love as an end in itself has long since become obsolete as a theorem."¹⁰⁹ Even the socialists who would have once paid homage to it renounced this practice and sailed back into the harbor of marriage. As a danger to the general public, "free love" would not be feasible but would fail in the face of reality. Apart from the fact that the idea of "free love" was never hegemonic in socialist thought, although it was advocated in early socialism by Charles Fourier (1772–1837), its socialist criticism is just as old.¹¹⁰ What was also understood by this term in detail also diverged greatly. While "free love" was put forward by bourgeois and conservative critics as a fighting term and criticism of modernity against the radical bourgeois women's movement and social democracy, the few female social democrats who affirmatively referred to it associated it more with a criticism of the legal form of marriage, but not of monogamous marriage per se.¹¹¹ The sharp distinction made by Michels can therefore be seen more as a strategy of argumentation.

Sexuality was not discussed inordinately in the social democratic and proletarian women's movements. The US historian Robert Neuman emphasized that the SPD of the German Empire had advocated "sexual conservatism" despite its criticism of traditional moral concepts and bourgeois marriage.¹¹² This assessment is contradicted by Richard Evans, who praises Neuman's work as pioneering, but denies his judgment. The attributes "conservative" or "bourgeois" would not be suitable to describe the Social Democratic position, as this rating was too strongly influenced by later moral concepts.¹¹³ Without presenting a final opinion, Michels himself remarked in an essay from 1927: "It would one day be an

¹⁰⁹ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 127.

¹¹⁰ ^A contemporary critique was formulated at the time by the female Saint-Simonians, for example. Skadi Siiri Krause, "Die Saint-Simonistinnen zwischen Frauen- und Arbeiterbewegung," in *Geschlecht und Klassenkampf: Die "Frauenfrage" aus deutscher und internationaler Perspektive im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Vincent Streichhahn and Frank Jacob (Berlin: Metropol, 2020), 189–193.

¹¹¹ Wally Zepler criticized that "free love" for most socialists "represents nothing more than a monogamous marriage freed from legal constraints." Wally Zepler, "Das psychische Problem in der Frauenfrage," *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 10, no. 4 (1906): 309.

¹¹² Robert Neuman, "The Sexual Question and Social Democracy in Imperial Germany," *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 3 (1974): 272.

¹¹³ Evans, *Sozialdemokratie und Frauenbewegung*, 257–258.

interesting task to subject to a thorough examination the relationship between sexual morality and socialism or the modern labor movement.”¹¹⁴

Leading social democrats such as August Bebel or Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), while emphasizing the naturalness of sexuality and explicitly granting it to women, restricted its legitimate exercise to marriage.¹¹⁵ This position was shared by a majority of social democrats. There were only a few exceptions in the proletarian women’s movement, such as Wally Zepler (1865–1940), Adelheid Popp (1869–1939), or Oda Olberg (1872–1955), who advocated a more open approach to sexuality in various gradations.¹¹⁶ Overall, Robert Michels was therefore at the forefront of the sexual reform movement with his plea for a “new sexual morality.” Apart from a few radical representatives of the bourgeois as well as the proletarian women’s movement and a few bohemians, nobody went as far as he did in his views. The bond between sexuality and marriage was no longer absolute with Michels and a few comrades-in-arms. This was not simply a matter of fulfilling sexual needs but of reforming sexual morality in order to bring about a fundamental change in gender relations “so that women and men would be fundamentally equal and subject to the same morals.”¹¹⁷

Even though the majority of social democrats did not represent such positions, they had been increasingly confronted with accusations from the bourgeoisie since the 1890s that they were responsible for the “dissolution of the family.” Karl Kautsky countered this in his explanation of the 1891 Erfurt program of the SPD: “Nobody in the party thinks of ‘abolishing’ the family, of legally abolishing it and forcibly dissolving it. ... What leads to dissolution is not the essence of co-operative production, but economic development.”¹¹⁸ Certainly, Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) advocated the thesis of the dissolution of the family in German ideology, but this was to be understood primarily as a description of destructive capitalist development and not as a political agenda.¹¹⁹

114 Michels, “Problem der Moralstatistik,” 443.

115 Heinz Niggemann, *Emanzipation zwischen Sozialismus und Feminismus: Die sozialdemokratische Frauenbewegung im Kaiserreich* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer, 1981), 237–282.

116 Oda Olberg, “Polemisches über Frauenfrage und Sozialismus,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 9, no. 4 (1905): 309; Wally Zepler, “Die Frau der Zukunft und die freie Liebe,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 3, no. 6 (1899): 290–300.

117 Briatte, *Bevormundete Staatsbürgerinnen*, 196.

118 Karl Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm in seinem grundsätzlichen Theil erläutert* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1912 [1892]), 146.

119 “Historically, the bourgeois gives the family the character of the bourgeois family, in which boredom and money are the binding link, and which also includes the bourgeois dissolution of the family, which does not prevent the family itself from always continuing to exist. Its dirty existence has its counterpart in the holy concept of it in official phraseology and universal hypoc-

Within social democracy, monogamous marriage continued to serve as an ideal. However, this was to be put on a new foundation. According to Clara Zetkin, marriage was decomposed by economic and historical development.¹²⁰ This development was to be welcomed because “the family as an economic unit is disappearing and in its place the family as a moral unit.” In this, “the woman, as a companion with equal rights, equal creation and equal aspirations, who strides forward with man, will be able to promote her individuality, but at the same time to fulfill her task as wife and mother to the highest degree.”¹²¹ For Niggermann, this is where Zetkin’s humanistic-idealistic tradition is evident,¹²² which can be seen as a common ground with Michels’.

A detailed picture of marriage under socialism was not sketched out by the social democratic actors at the time. Here they remained faithful to the unspoken ban on images (*Bilderverbot*), although some cursory remarks can be found among various social democrats. Oda Olberg, for example, took the view that monogamy would be “the predominant form of marriage in socialist society” but that “extramarital forms of sexual intercourse” would not be seen as immoral.¹²³ Engels, too, in his work *The Origin of the Family*, tends to advocate the model of a monogamous marriage in the socialist society of the future, although he abstains from a final judgment.¹²⁴ Marriage under socialism is defined by the actors primarily ex negativo. The legal and material inequality of the sexes cannot be the basis for the “new marriage.” Its future foundation is based on autonomy and comradeship. In this respect, social democracy differed little from the ideas of the “radical” bourgeois women’s movement.

risy.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Die deutsche Ideologie,” in *MEW*, vol. 3 (Berlin: Dietz, 1969 [1845]), 164.

120 Clara Zetkin, “Nur mit der proletarischen Frau wird der Sozialismus siegen. Rede auf dem SPD-Parteitag in Gotha,” in *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitags der Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland, abgehalten zu Gotha vom 11. bis 16. Oktober 1896* (Berlin: Vorwärts, 1896), 160–168.

121 *Ibid.*, 167.

122 Niggermann, *Emanzipation*, 241.

123 Olberg, “Polemisches,” 309.

124 “What we can now conjecture about the way in which sexual relations will be ordered after the impending overthrow of capitalist production is mainly of a negative character, limited for the most part to what will disappear. But what will there be new? That will be answered when a new generation has grown up [...]. When these people are in the world, they will care precious little what anybody today thinks they ought to do; they will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual – and that will be the end of it.” Engels, *Ursprung der Familie*, 83.

Even those who relaxed the ties of sexuality to marriage, such as Michels and Stöcker, continued to regard monogamous marriage as ideal. Stöcker, for example, emphasized that the “new sexual morality” did not want to abolish either the family or the institution of marriage but that “living together between people who are personally attracted to each other, the trinity of father, mother, and child ... would always remain the highest ideal.”¹²⁵ What they intended first and foremost was the “liberation” of love from its bourgeois compulsive character. A “free love” in the sense of unbridled sexuality, free of norms and values, as suggested by Helene Lange’s critique of “feminist thought anarchy” and “hurrah eroticism” (*Hurra-Erotik*), was represented in reality by basically no one except in some circles of artistic and intellectual bohemians.¹²⁶ Overnight, as even Michels knew, his developed principles of the “new sexual morality” would not be realized. These would initially “only be able to have validity for a small elite of morally high standing people.”¹²⁷

The disputes about gender relations at the turn of the century were accompanied by a broad social crisis discourse in which “free love” functioned as a modern-critical cipher. The fear of disintegration and anomie caused by the threatening dissolution of social bonds was seen as the “doom of modern societies.” The discourse about a “new sexual morality” appeared as an expression of this. According to Arni, the line of conflict ran between individualism and social obligation, which Michels and his comrades-in-arms had to take into account in their conceptions.¹²⁸ Michels solves this apparent contradiction, as has hopefully become clear, by understanding the “new sexual morality” as an ethical principle and moral goal, “whose aspiration, however, lies at the same time in the individual and collective interests of humanity.”¹²⁹

Conclusion

Sexual Ethics is definitely an opus that is immensely underestimated in its importance. Michels’ starting point for his feminist-sexual reform writing was the criticism of bourgeois double morality, against the background of which a reform of the same is intended, which in its new form would serve as the moral basis of an

¹²⁵ Helene Stöcker quoted after Briatte, *Bevormundete Staatsbürgerinnen*, 198.

¹²⁶ Helene Lange, “Feministische Gedanken-anarchie,” in *Frauen und Sexualmoral*, ed. Marie-louise Janssen-Jureit (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996 [1909]), 147–155.

¹²⁷ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, 126.

¹²⁸ Arni, “Liebesethik,” 200.

¹²⁹ Michels, *Sexual Ethics*, VIII.

egalitarian understanding of gender relations in modernity. As a sociological observer whose work “oscillates between the intention of political action and scientific description,”¹³⁰ Michels not only attempted to generate a gain in knowledge but also to intervene in political debates. In the present work, his critique of bourgeois marriage and sexual morality was also located in the contemporary discourse. The aim was to provide a contextualization that went beyond that of his previous reception.¹³¹ Michels appeared at the beginning of the 20th century with a critical discussion of sexual morality at a time when the Association for Maternity Protection did not even exist. This does not mean, of course, that the discourse did not exist before either, but Michels set his own impulses in this debate. He was certainly inspired by activists of the women’s movement and social democracy. However, the attempt to monolithically classify Michels must fail. It seems most appropriate to categorize him as a border crosser between the radical factions of the reform movement of the German Empire and whose *Sexual Ethics* deserves a more intensive academic debate in the future.

Works Cited

Archival Material

Correspondence from Robert Michels, Archivio Roberto Michels/Archivio Fondazione Luigi Einaudi (AFLE), Turin.

Secondary Sources

Anne-Laure, Briatte. *Bevormundete Staatsbürgerinnen: Die ‘radikale’ Frauenbewegung im Deutschen Kaiserreich*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2020.

Arni, Caroline. “L’Amour en Europe: Ein Versuch über Robert Michels’ vergleichende Liebeswissenschaft und den Liebesdiskurs in der Moderne.” In *Der Eigensinn des Materials. Erkundungen sozialer Wirklichkeit: Festschrift für Claudia Honegger zum 60. Geburtstag*, edited by Caroline Arni, 71–89. Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2007.

130 Jasmin Siri, *Parteien: Zur Soziologie einer politischen Form* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2012), 53.

131 So it seems as banal as tautological for Kandal to simply judge without further specification: “Michels’ discussions of sexuality, sexual morality, and the relations of the sexes had as its stimulus ‘the new sexual ethic’ advocated by feminists.” Kandal, “Egalitarian Sexual Ethics,” XXII.

- Arni, Caroline. “Seelengesetze mit Gesellschaftswert. Weibliche Subjektwerdung und die Utopie menschlicher Perfektion in der feministisch-sexualreformerischen Liebesethik um 1900.” *Feministische Studien* 27, no. 2 (2009): 196–209.
- Bebel, August. “Die Frau und der Sozialismus.” In *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, vol. 10, edited by Internationales Institut für Sozialgeschichte Amsterdam. Munich: K. G. Sauer, 1996 [1879].
- Bluhm, Harald and Skadi S. Krause. “Einleitung. Robert Michels’ Soziologie des Parteiwesens. Oligarchien und Eliten – Die Kehrseiten moderner Demokratie.” In *Robert Michels’ Soziologie des Parteiwesens*, edited by Bluhm/Krause, 9–19. Wiesbaden: Springer, 2012.
- Bonnell, Andrew. “Robert Michels, Max Weber, and the Sexual Question.” *The European Legacy* 3, no. 6. (1998): 97–105.
- Delap, Lucy. “The ‘Woman Question’ and the Origins of Feminism.” In *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, edited by Gareth Stedman Jones, 319–348. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Dietrich, Anette. *Weißer Weiblichkeiten: Konstruktionen von “Rasse” und Geschlecht im deutschen Kolonialismus*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2007.
- Engels, Friedrich. “Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats.” In *Marx-Engels-Werke*, vol. 21, 25–173. Berlin: Dietz, 1962 [1884].
- Evans, Richard. *Sozialdemokratie und Frauenbewegung im deutschen Kaiserreich*. Bonn: Dietz, 1979.
- Ferraris, Pino. “Questione femminile e morale sessuale nell’evoluzione politica di Roberto Michels.” In *Roberto Michels. Economia – Sociologia – Politica*, edited by Riccardo Faucci, 97–122. Torino: Giappichelli 1989.
- Frevort, Ute. *Frauen-Geschichte: Zwischen bürgerlicher Verbesserung und neuer Weiblichkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986.
- Genett, Timm. *Der Fremde im Kriege: Zur politischen Theorie und Biographie von Robert Michels 1876–1936*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008.
- Genett, Timm. “Robert Michels. Pionier der sozialen Bewegungsforschung.” In *Soziale Bewegungen zwischen Dynamik und Erstarrung*, edited by Timm Genett, 11–69. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008.
- Geske, Hans. “Oligarchie, Faschismus ... Feminismus? Ein neuer Blick auf Robert Michels.” In *Berliner Debatte Initial* 31, no. 3 (2020): 99–109.
- Hausen, Karin. “Die Polarisierung der ‚Geschlechtscharaktere‘. Eine Spiegelung der Dissoziation von Erwerbs- und Familienleben.” In *Geschlechtergeschichte als Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, edited by Karin Hausen, 19–49. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012 [1976].
- Kandal, Terry R. “From Egalitarian Sexual Ethics to Gender Politics: An Evaluation of Michels’ Contribution.” In *Robert Michels: Sexual Ethics. A Study of Borderline Questions. With a new introduction by Terry R. Kandal*, xi–lxv. New York/London: Routledge, 2002.
- Kandal, Terry R. “Profile. Rober Michels’ Sexual Ethics.” *Sociology* 38 (March/April 2001): 60–66.
- Kandal, Terry R. *The Woman Question in Classical Sociology Theory*. Miami: Florida International University Press, 1988.
- Kautsky, Karl. *Das Erfurter Programm in seinem grundsätzlichen Teil erläutert*. Stuttgart: Dietz, 1912 [1892].

- Krause, Skadi Siiri. "Die Saint-Simonistinnen zwischen Frauen- und Arbeiterbewegung." In *Geschlecht und Klassenkampf. Die "Frauenfrage" aus deutscher und internationaler Perspektive im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, edited by Vincent Streichhahn and Frank Jacob, 185–201. Berlin: Metropol, 2020.
- Lange, Helene. "Feministische Gedanken-anarchie." In *Frauen und Sexualmoral*, edited by Marielouise Janssen-Jureit, 147–155. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996 [1909].
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. "Die deutsche Ideologie." In *MEW*, vol. 3, 5–530. Berlin: Dietz, 1969 [1845].
- Michels, Robert. "Altes und Neues zum Problem der Moralstatistik (Kritik der Geschlechtsmoralstatistik)." In *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 57, no. 2 (1927): 417–469, 701–745.
- Michels, Robert. *Amour et Chasteté: Essais Sociologique*. Paris: Siard & Brière, 1914.
- Michels, Robert. "Beitrag zum Problem der Moral." *Die neue Zeit* 1, no. 15 (1903): 470–475.
- Michels, Robert. *Brautstandsmoral. Eine kritische Betrachtung*. Leipzig: Magazin Verlag, 1904.
- Michels, Robert. "Das Weib und der Intellectualismus." *Dokumente der Frauen* 7, no. 4 (1902): 106–114.
- Michels, Robert. "Der vierundreißigste Bebel." *Die Gleichheit* 14, no. 15 (1904): 113–115.
- Michels, Robert. "Die Arbeiterinnenbewegung in Italien." *Die Frau* 9, no. 6 (1902): 328–336.
- Michels, Robert. "Die deutsche Frau im Beruf." *Die Gleichheit* 14, no. 11 (1904): 82–84.
- Michels, Robert. *Die Grenzen der Geschlechtsmoral: Prolegomena. Gedanken und Untersuchungen*. Leipzig: Frauen-Verlag, 1911.
- Michels, Robert. "Die Zwischenstufen der Ehrbarkeit." *Die neue Generation* 9 (September 1909): 351–359.
- Michels, Robert. "Ein sexueller Kongreß in Italien." *Die neue Generation* 2 (1911): 63–70.
- Michels, Robert. "Entstehung der Frauenfrage als soziale Frage." *Die Frauenbewegung* 9, no. 3 (1903): 17–18.
- Michels, Robert. " Erotische Streifzüge: Deutsche und italienische Liebesformen. Aus dem Pariser Liebesleben." *Mutterschutz* 11, no. 9 (1906): 362–374.
- Michels, Robert. "Frauenstimmrecht – schon heute eine Notwendigkeit." *Die Frauenbewegung* 8, no. 23 (1902): 177–178.
- Michels, Robert. *I Limiti della Morale Sessuale: Prolegomena: Indagini e Pensieri*. Torino: Bocca, 1912.
- Michels, Robert. "Neomalthusianismus." *Frauenzukunft* 1, no. 1 (1910): 42–55.
- Michels, Robert. "Rückblick auf die Geschichte der proletarischen Frauenbewegung in Italien." *Die Gleichheit* 13, no. 1, 2–3; no. 2, 11–13; no. 5, 36–38; no. 8, 58–60; no. 11, 83–85; no. 17, 131–134 (all 1903).
- Michels, Robert. *Sexual Ethics: A Study of Borderland Questions*. New York: Walter Scott, 1914.
- Michels, Robert. *Sittlichkeit in Ziffern? Kritik der Moralstatistik*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1928.
- Michels, Robert. *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie*. Leipzig: Klinkhardt, 1911.
- Michels-Linder, Gisela. "Die sozialistische Frauenbewegung in Italien." *Die Gleichheit* 16, no. 22 (1906): 153.

- Mill, John Stuart. “Parlamentsrede über die Zulassung der Frauen zum Wahlrecht.” In *Ausgewählte Werke*, vol. 1, edited by Ulrike Ackermann and Hans Jörg Schmidt, 389–402. Hamburg: Murmann, 2012.
- Mischung, Roland. “Religionsethnologie.” In *Ethnologie. Einführung und Überblick*, edited by Bettina Beer and Hans Fischer, 213–236. Berlin: Reimer, 2012.
- Mitzman, Arthur. *Sociology and Estrangement: Three Sociologists of Imperial Germany*. New York: Knopf, 1973.
- Neuman, Robert. “The Sexual Question and Social Democracy in Imperial Germany.” *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1974): 271–286.
- Niggermann, Heinz. *Emanzipation zwischen Sozialismus und Feminismus: Die sozialdemokratische Frauenbewegung im Kaiserreich*. Wuppertal: Peter Hammer, 1981.
- Nipperdey, Thomas. *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 1866–1918*, vol. 1: *Arbeitswelt und Bürgergeist*. München: Beck, 1991.
- Olberg, Oda. “Polemische über Frauenfrage und Sozialismus.” *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, no. 4 (April 1905): 301–310.
- Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Abgehalten zu Bremen vom 18. bis 24. September 1904*. Berlin: Vorwärts, 1904.
- Schaser, Angelika. “Geschlecht strukturiert die Welt: Die Bedeutung des 19. Jahrhunderts für die Permanenz der Geschlechterhierarchie.” In *Durchbruch der Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das 19. Jahrhundert*, edited by Birgit Aschmann, 171–198. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2019.
- Scharinger, Manfred. *Proletarische Frauenbewegung: Kritische Bilanz und politische Lehren*. Wien: RSO, 2009.
- Schwartz, Michael. *Sozialistische Eugenik: Eugenische Sozialtechnologien in Debatten und Politik der deutschen Sozialdemokratie 1890–1933*. Bonn: Dietz, 1995.
- Siri, Jasmin. *Parteien: Zur Soziologie einer politischen Form*. Wiesbaden: Springer, 2012.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. *Les rites de passage*. Paris: Deschamps, 1909.
- Zepler, Wally. “Das psychische Problem in der Frauenfrage.” *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 10, no. 4 (1906): 306–315.
- Zepler, Wally. “Die Frau der Zukunft und die freie Liebe.” *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 3, no. 6 (1899): 290–300.
- Zetkin, Clara. “Nur mit der proletarischen Frau wird der Sozialismus siegen: Rede auf dem SPD-Parteitag in Gotha.” In *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitags der Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland, abgehalten zu Gotha vom 11. bis 16. Oktober 1896*, 160–168. Berlin: Vorwärts, 1896.