

## THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND SEXUAL IDENTITIES

*The industrial revolution is a pivotal social transformation in Western societies. Discussed in detail in Chapter 9, we focus here on its influence on sexual identities (see Chapter 7).*

Consider what it must have been like for people with same-sex desires before city-living. Agrarian life was isolated. One can imagine that finding same-sex sex and love in pastoral regions was difficult because of the low population density of these areas. Indeed, this was not just an issue for sexual minorities—social historian Julie Peakman (2013) uses court records to demonstrate that bestiality occurred at significant rates in medieval England, and argues it was because of a lack of other options for many people during this period. The ways in which sexual activity occurs and is practiced is shaped and structured by the society in which one lives (see Chapter 8). That is why the industrial revolution – usually studied in terms of work, technology and urbanization – also had a significant effect on sexuality.

The move to city living had such a transformative effect on sexual activity that it even influenced the ways in which we identify sexually. This is partly attributable to the way the city facilitates sexual encounters. The defining characteristic of a city is that it has lots of people grouped together. As such, simple probability ensured that there were enough gay people in this mass, concentrated within the same relatively small area, that gay social networks and even a gay subculture could form. While court records document that same-sex sex occurred in rural areas (Peakman 2013; Upchurch 2013), there was a marked increase in prevalence (as evidenced by more urban-area charges and convictions for these acts) alongside the transition to city living.

This coincided with a growing body of scholarly work from early pioneers of the gay liberationist movement—Karl Westphal, Karl Ulrichs and Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, all based in Germany in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. These scholars sought to classify same-sex sexual acts as belonging to a *type* of person; labelled variously as a third sex, an invert, or homosexual (Spencer 1995). From this starting point of intellectual recognition, they could campaign for legal and social equality. Prior to this time, sexual identities were not used to understand or define a person: a man performed a sexual act, but his sexual identity was not tied into that act. Under this new theorizing, homosexuality was no longer a collection of particular acts; instead, as Foucault (1984, p.43) famously wrote, “The homosexual was now a species.”

Sigmund Freud (1962 [1905]) offered an explanation of homosexuality’s origins in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Here, Freud theorized that sexuality was not innate, arguing instead that

childhood experiences constructed men to become either heterosexual or homosexual—the latter being something he called *inversion*. Homosexuality, Freud said, was a product of one’s gendered behaviours not aligning with social norms, which he attributed to the absence of a father figure and an over-dominating mother. In one of his footnotes he wrote, “. . . the presence of both parents plays an important part. The absence of a strong father in childhood not infrequently favours the occurrence of inversion” (p. 146).

Freud’s broader body of research asked important questions about sex and sexuality that had not really been discussed before. While his theory about homosexuality is wrong, Freud can be viewed as trying to humanize people with same-sex sexual desires by explaining their “condition.” Yet through his explanation of gender inversion, Freud gave rise to a false narrative; that homosexuality is the result of a society giving bad gender role models to its children.

Freud’s narrative was so persuasive in part because people had witnessed social changes occurring. There was simply more same-sex sex occurring as a result of increased population density, and gay subcultures emerging. People at the time mistakenly believed that the gender segregation of the city as the reason for increased instances of same-sex sex, rather than the increased population density. In British and American cultures, it was believed that the processes of industrialization—the removal of men from their families for large periods of time—created a social system designed to ‘make’ boys gay (Anderson 2009). Freud’s arguments provided an interesting theoretical explanation for this mistake: as we highlight in Chapter 3, sometimes a theory remains well-known not because it is correct, but because it is interesting. And most important in this discussion is the fact that how we experience and understand sexual desires changed as a result of the industrial revolution.

## References

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