

Panel review: “Sexuality and the Other: Asymmetries of power in erotic fantasies and sexual encounters in the 20th century”, Lausanne, 10 June 2016, 4. Schweizerische Geschichtstage.

Organizers: Judith Große, David Möller

Participants: Judith Große, David Möller, Ulrike Schaper

Comment: Christa Wirth

Chair: Martin Dusinberre

Bericht von: Michael Offermann, Universität Bern

In her opening paper, the co-convenor **JUDITH GROBE** sketched out a theoretical framework and situated the panel in the historiography of Western sexuality. Michel Foucault's ‘La volonté de savoir’ (1976) still remains the central point of reference for historians interested in the history of power and sexuality. With its interest in the production of ‘perversions’ and ‘normal sexuality’ by discourses of truth, Große pointed to the productive character ascribed to power by Foucault. However, historians of sexuality have repeatedly criticised Foucault for his focus on the 17th and 18th centuries and the absence of race and colonialism in his oeuvre. Accordingly, Foucault did not address the second wave of sexology that emerged in Europe around 1900, when European sexologists increasingly turned to non-European cultures to seek for reforms of Western sexuality. Since the 1980s and 1990s, postcolonial readings of Foucault tried to situate the history of sexuality in the context of the history of Western imperialism.¹ Große's own research, for example, asks how the non-European Other was employed by Western sexologists to reform the European institution of marriage at the turn of the 20th-century, the time of the so called ‘marriage crisis’. According to Große, Western sexology around 1900 was highly ambiguous. The reference to non-European cultures and their sexuality oscillated between fear and desire, illustrated by the recurrent tropes of the ‘sensual orient’ and the ‘savage’, ‘lustful’ sexuality of the non-European. At the same time, sexological research around 1900 was deeply implicated in the power-knowledge nexus of modern imperialism. Anthropology, for a large part enabled by modern colonialism, continued to maintain the European monogamous marriage as the endpoint of human evolutionary development. While the ‘sensual orient’ could provide correctives for the European marriage, European sexology still differentiated the colonial Other from its Western counterpart.

DAVID MÖLLER employed such a postcolonial critique in his paper on the ‘R&R program’ (rest and recuperation) of the U.S. army during the Vietnam War. Möller examined how an orientalist discourse of the ‘Asian’ female Other structured the R&R programme in Taiwan. During their military service in Vietnam, the soldiers lived in the context of a heavily militarised masculinity that posited heterosexuality and manly domination as the norm and necessary to the morale of the fighting soldier. At the same time, sexuality was heavily suppressed during war and intimate relationships with Vietnamese women were officially forbidden. In its brochures handed out to the G.I.s, however, the R&R program employed an

¹ Stoler, A. L. (1995). *Race and the Education of Desire. Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.

Orientalist discourse of a 'sensual Orient' with 'docile Asian women'. At same time, the brochures warned against the enticing and dangerous nature of Asian women, who would convey venereal diseases, and commit fraud and burglary, thus reflecting the ambiguity of the sexualised and racialized Other already noted in Judith Große's paper. The R&R program relied on a strictly regulated system that was based on the stereotypes about obedient and complaisant Asian femininity. Taiwanese women were employed in bars and spas where the soldier-tourist could hire their services, which did not explicitly include sex work. To organise the program, the U.S. worked closely together with Taiwanese officials and the soldier-tourist had to enter a contract with the bar or spa owner. These contracts mirrored the deeply asymmetrical power relations between the soldier-tourist and the racialized and sexualised Other, since the women themselves were no party in the contract, subject to regular health checks and left no traces in Taiwanese and U.S. archives.

Adverting to the value of audiovisual sources for the history of the 20th century, **ULRIKE SCHAPER** analysed the 1974 soft-porn movie *Emmanuelle*. Despite bad reviews the low-budget production proved a success and brought the genre into the mainstream. Schaper argued that the movie set its story of a sexually liberated European self against the backdrop of an otherised Asian society. The movie depicts Thailand as an exotic, fascinating but also dangerous far Eastern country, the home of a traditionally more promiscuous 'ars erotica', which serves as a catalyst for *Emmanuelle's* sexual liberation. While the female protagonist has various sexual encounters with Thais, they only serve as mediators of her emancipation process, which is directed by her European male counterpart. The movie further establishes European dominance by depicting Thais as faceless, driven by a 'primitive desire'. Thais are readily serving the White protagonist's fantasies and desires, whereas emotional relationships are only existing among the members of the European expat community in Thailand. In this way, the paper demonstrated the relevance of porn studies to analyse the sexual fears and anxieties of societies and how they are related to a racialized Other.

In her comment **CHRISTA WIRTH** stressed the commonalities of the three papers in depicting how representations of the non-European Other inform us about the fears and desires of Western societies. She called the panellists, however, to expand on the historiographical and chronological context of their papers. How did, for example, Western feminism react to the representations of female sexuality and Thai society in the 'Emmanuelle' movies? And was the 1970s feminism reflected in reports or memoirs of organisers or participators of the R&R program? In terms of the geographical site of the last two papers, she noted the longer history of the Pacific as a site of Western scientific exploration from James Cook's travels to nuclear tests. More generally, she posed the question how historians can write more self-reflective representations of the non-European Other.

The concluding discussion also centred on the longer trajectory of the histories presented by the panellists. David Möller noted that predecessors to the R&R program existed already during the Korean War and that the notions of a 'docile Asian woman' that sustained the program were equally held in the French and Japanese empires in the Pacific. In turn, the R&R program was decisive for establishing a sex industry in Thailand, an association which was firmly established in Western imagination by the *Emmanuelle* movies.

The panel thus combined three informative and convincing papers that demonstrated the rich opportunities of the history of sexuality and the 'racial Other' in the 20th century. However, some questions would deserve more exploration. Most importantly, the 'otherised' subjects rarely appeared in the papers beyond their Western representations. This is of course a considerable challenge, since – as was mentioned by David Möller – they usually leave few traces in the archives. Secondly, the ambiguities and controversies of these representations

within Western societies also deserve more attention. Judith Große rightly maintained that the representations of 'other' sexualities and their meanings were always contested within European societies. Similarly, the R&R program and Emmanuelle also received criticism from within European societies at that time. An analysis of these debates might also serve to destabilise the dichotomy between a powerful West and the 'otherised' non-European subjects.

Michael Offermann, Universität Bern

Panel overview:

Grosse Judith, Western marriage and its 'racial' Other – Sexual science and its powerful representations of non-European sexualities

Möller David, Militarized masculinities and the Asian female Other: Intimate relationships in the Asia Pacific during the cold war

Schaper Ulrike, Liberating the white self: Colonial phantasies and power dynamics in „Emmanuelle“