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Felix Gilbert on the Sexual Morals of the New Generation (Retrospective Account, 1988)

In this excerpt from his 1988 memoirs, German-American historian Felix Gilbert (1905-1991), who lived in Berlin until his emigration in 1933, describes his generation's attitudes towards sexual identity and sexual behavior. The views he expresses on matters such as Paragraph 175, love and sexuality, and marriage and divorce identify him as a member of the liberal bourgeoisie.

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I have often wondered whether, as it is frequently said, the First World War brought about a great change in sex morals. Certainly we all had read our Freud; although such reading sharpened our psychological understanding, I don't think we believed that our lives and actions were dominated by sex. Actually, if I reconstruct my own attitude and those of my contemporaries correctly, we had a rather simple attitude with regard to questions of sex and sexual morality, which was to let everyone do what he or she wanted to do, and to talk as little as possible about the sex morals of other people. This had its particular bearing upon homosexuality. Berlin had the reputation of leaving homosexuals undisturbed, and accordingly, the city was popular among homosexuals. Foreigners visiting the city usually wished to see something of the amorality of Berlin life about which they had heard so much. Consequently, Berliners—and I was no exception—often guided visitors to a restaurant and large dance hall frequented exclusively by homosexuals. The foreigners usually went away happily content that they now could talk on the basis of personal experience about the licentiousness of the city. Actually, homosexuality played a small role in Germany; on the basis of later observations, I would say a much smaller role than in England. In Prussia homosexuality had been proscribed by the criminal code since the early nineteenth century, but it was official policy not to apply the relevant paragraph. We, of course, knew people or couples who were homosexuals, but it was not a topic of discussion or particular interest, and as far as I can judge, it did no harm to the social positions or the professional careers of these people.

What seemed to me predominant in our attitude to questions of sex and morality was the demand for a certain honesty. We despised the nineteenth-century attitude that treated women of different classes differently, suggesting that one should go to bed with a woman of one class, but marry a woman of another. The essential requirement in the relation between sexes seemed to us the presence of a true affection. If that was there it seemed to us no great difference whether a couple lived together for a while and then either got married or separated, or whether, if they were more conventional, they began to live together only after they had gotten married.

In our consciously held views and attitude we were probably quite “modern,” but it must also be said that the outward forms of social life, at least among the bourgeoisie, were still quite conventional: marriages were celebrated with all the traditional solemnity, and divorces, although becoming more and more frequent, were still considered to be a minor catastrophe. My grandmother was deeply unhappy when one of her granddaughters got a divorce, although later on she became more resigned to it. A student friend of mine who lived together with a female student frequently visited our house, and the couple was very popular with my grandmother; but I never would have dared to tell her that they lived together. The attitude of my grandmother was not so much an expression of a particularly Victorian outlook, but more the reflection of “official,” generally accepted attitudes. Moreover, in some way this parting of actual behavior and publicly accepted values may be considered characteristic of contrasting attitudes that had developed in Germany in the twenties. Revolution and inflation in Germany, which had encouraged radical convictions and notions more quickly and strongly than in other countries, also strengthened a belief in the need to maintain traditional customs and values.

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