

Dartmouth College

## Dartmouth Digital Commons

---

Dartmouth Scholarship

Faculty Work

---

1-1-2000

### An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society

Michael Dietrich  
*Dartmouth College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/facoa>



Part of the [Biology Commons](#)

---

#### Dartmouth Digital Commons Citation

Dietrich, Michael, "An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society" (2000). *Dartmouth Scholarship*. 46.

<https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/facoa/46>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Work at Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dartmouth Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu](mailto:dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu).

caratteri dell'azione intenzionale come aspetto dell'attività umana – sono sempre le tesi di W. Sellars a costituire un importante punto di riferimento – differente da quella che viene messa in luce dalle descrizioni e dalle spiegazioni della medesima da un punto di vista più propriamente cognitivo. La formulazione di una teoria del carattere significativo delle azioni umane su base scientifico naturale costituisce così la base – s'intende provvisoria e incompleta – di un modello scientifico-naturale dell'azione morale.

STEFANO POGGI, *Dipartimento di Filosofia, Via Bolognese 52, 50139 Firenze, Italy.*

JENNIFER TERRY, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, xiv + 537 pp., illus., \$75.00 (\$20.00 paperback).

A history focused exclusively on scientific research of homosexuality in the United States would hardly qualify as an American obsession. As her title suggests, however, Jennifer Terry's interests are broader and her book is richer for it. Cast as a Foucaultian narrative, Terry's history recovers the constitution of homosexuality as a scientific, yet varying, subject. In doing so she seeks to demonstrate that scientific understanding of homosexuality has been dynamic and historically contingent.

Starting with the problem of classifying human diversity in the nineteenth century, Terry charts the deployment of 'deviance' in juxtaposition to the 'natural order' of 'civilized society.' Biologically constituted by scientists such as Richard Kraft-Ebing, homosexuality was seen through an evolutionary lens as backward or degenerate (pp. 46-47). Such 'degeneration' was associated with lower classes and criminality by some, but also led to calls for moderation as homosexuality moved from a 'punishable moral offense' to a 'medical matter' (p. 70). In Germany, Magnus Hirschfeld, for instance, used scientific research on homosexuality to argue for its decriminalization. While much has been written on Hirschfeld's efforts in Germany, the originality and importance of Terry's work are best realized when she turns to the development of responses to similar types of medicalization in the United States.

Terry locates the influence of German research on sexuality in an American culture anxious about changing gender roles and eager to reform a long list of urban vices and social problems. Recast by Americans first as a form of madness and later as a symptom of 'modern conditions,' homosexuality became part of the progressive reform agenda. In an incisive set of chapters that form the core of this book, Terry demonstrates how progressive era concerns with 'normal sexuality' and the 'normal family' led to a crucial shift in attitudes toward homosexuality. Rather than view homosexuality as inherently pathological, researchers such as Katharine Bement Davis recast homosexuality as a variant of 'normal' sexuality. The value of Terry's analytic framework is most evident in her discussion of the history of sex variants research. Her chapter on George Henry and the Committee for the Study of Sex Variants expertly captures Henry's scientific impulse and then deftly juxtaposes Henry's attitudes with those of his subjects in the next chapter. This analysis is made possible by the extensive interviews included as a part of Henry's study as well as by Terry's interest in giving voice to those who were subjected to science. As such, Terry's understanding of science goes well beyond conventional historical contextualization, which she also provides with great skill. Indeed Terry's account of Kinsey's sex research and its often negative reception in post-war America is beautifully

sono sempre le tesi di  
te da quella che viene  
un punto di vista più  
ere significativo delle  
intende provvisoria e

irenze, Italy.

osexuality in Modern  
37 pp., illus., \$75.00

uality in the United  
le suggests, however,  
Cast as a Foucaultian  
ty as a scientific, yet  
ific understanding of

nineteenth century,  
ne 'natural order' of  
Richard Kraft-Ebing,  
r degenerate (pp. 46-  
nality by some, but  
shable moral offense'  
stance, used scientific  
uch has been written  
of Terry's work are  
to similar types of

an American culture  
st of urban vices and  
later as a symptom of  
reform agenda. In an  
y demonstrates how  
mily' led to a crucial  
uality as inherently  
homosexuality as a  
rk is most evident in  
n George Henry and  
y's scientific impulse  
s in the next chapter.  
as a part of Henry's  
subjected to science.  
nventional historical  
d Terry's account of  
merica is beautifully

contextualized in terms of growing domestic and international paranoia characteristic of the Cold War Era. In such an atmosphere, Kinsey's reports fueled public fears of subversion and deviance.

One of the themes of *An American Obsession* is that throughout the twentieth century American homosexuals have both been drawn to scientific accounts of homosexuality and questioned those accounts. Terry convincingly argues that understanding the perceived promise and peril of scientific research on homosexuality, then and now, requires that we situate both scientist and subject in relation to the cultural anxieties and political realities that are informing their attitudes.

MICHAEL R. DIETRICH, *Department of Biological Sciences, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH 03755, USA.*