

## Käthe Kollwitz on Sexuality and Gender (1919-1932)

### Abstract

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Numerous aspects of human activity have to do with gender and sexuality in some way, even if only marginally, and this also applies to many lines in Käthe Kollwitz' diaries. In the interest of space and curation, therefore, these selected entries focus on just a few aspects, including romantic desire, family planning, parenting, and the ability of women to live self-determined lives. Significant gaps of time occur between some of these entries, including an especially large one of nearly five years between 1923 and 1928. This stems primarily from a subjective determination about which diary entries relate to the themes of sex and gender explored here. It also reflects the fact that Kollwitz wrote in her diary far less often and less extensively in the later years of the Weimar Republic than in the early ones. In approaching these selected entries as historical sources, the reader should keep in mind that Käthe Kollwitz lived in Berlin, socialized in artistic circles, and approached the subject through the lens of her individual experiences and disposition. Her entries nevertheless illustrate attitudes that circulated in at least some circles of German society at the time.

Many of the entries here recount frank conversations that Kollwitz had with her oldest son Hans about romance, desire, and his chosen life path. (Kollwitz's only other child, Peter, had died in combat in 1914.) Kollwitz's sympathetic ear did not preclude her passing occasional judgment on the decisions that Hans and his friends made, and such moments give a glimpse into the generational change, and even revolt, in Weimar Germany with regard to gender roles and sexual attitudes. Women's choices to have children or not also came up frequently in Kollwitz's diary, as did references to abortion, whose legal status sparked heated debate throughout the Weimar Republic. Germany's criminal code reclassified abortion in 1926 from a felony to a misdemeanor, and the state made medically indicated abortions legal in 1927, but the procedure was never fully legalized. In the 1920s, Kollwitz designed posters on behalf of the KPD for a liberalization of abortion law and spoke out clearly in favor of a woman's right to free choice (see her poster against the abortion paragraphs).

The various ways in which women carved out independent lives for themselves clearly fascinated Kollwitz. Many of her entries, for instance, chronicled the activities of her friend Constance Harding-Krayl (who went by "Stan"), an artist and freelance newspaper correspondent who personified the era's "New Woman."

### Source

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January 14, 1920

[...]

Anny Löwenstein tells me about her love affair. At the age of 50, she enters into a love affair with a long-married man whom she has loved for many years.

Margret Bartsch was here. She leads a somewhat risky life. Seeks out male company in the [department store] KDW and on the street. Then chooses the ones she likes. Says she has no other way of meeting men. I don't think she has intercourse with them.

[...]

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February 18, 1920

[...]

Hans speaks one evening about [Max] Immanuel and Eva. He started with that, but actually meant himself. About his love affairs with girls. That in the summer he was still of the opinion that you should only get close to a girl if it's a love that you're convinced will last. Now his position is different. He wants to enjoy love, but spontaneously. Take what the moment brings. What can I say to that? This slow person, almost 28 years old, who always suffers from inhibitions, even in erotic matters, might find great happiness by having a love affair. I only advised him that he must do no harm to another person. But how many fine girls there are who agree to live through a short period of love.

[...]

March 20, 1920

[...]

This girl [Helene Dmuchowski] seems quite unusual to me. When our Hans and Hans Koch went away to see the meetings, she stayed with me and we talked. She talked about what has always been a question for me: How can young people live now? She says that she was very unhappy when life, as it used to be in earlier times, simply collapsed after the war and revolution. Neither husband nor child is possible for her now. How does she intend to live now? Trusting only her inner voice, she wants to surrender to the roaring current of time and let herself be carried along. She does not know where it will lead her. A great journey to the East is vaguely in her mind's eye. She seems to be connected to Hans Koch for the time being, but she doesn't want to go to Blankenburg, only for a visit. For now, she wants to go to Switzerland. She does not want to accept money from her rich father.

For me, she has something in common with the Russian women as described by Nadja Strasser. Except that they saw very positive work in front of their eyes and Helene only has fog in front of her eyes. But rarely has a girl of this generation struck me like this one. So beautiful, so pure, so full of promise.

How do they all try to find their way through the complicated, cramped present life? This Helene...

[...]

On the other side, there is only Paula<sup>[1]</sup> with her old, simple maternal instinct. Nothing has changed for her. She has her husband and children; they mean the world to her. She gives herself to this world with more fervor than we did in our generation. She is a wonderfully accomplished woman in this respect.

But she is also not 20 years old, she is 30. The crises of recent years have found her when she was already settled.

[...]

May 29, 1920

["Rele," Kollwitz' niece Regula, and "Hennes," Reles' second husband Kurt, are visiting:]

[...]

Rele looks so terribly miserable that it is quite painful to look at her. Her eyes are oversized, her lips sometimes don't close completely. Her cheeks are narrow and hollow.

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Hennes is also thin. They are not people who are suited to procreation. They also prevent having children and who knows if Rele would have one, because she didn't have one with Heinz [Rele's first husband] either. It all makes me so sad. What pressure there must be on Georg and Lise [Rele's parents; Lise was Kollwitz's sister].

[...]

And Katta had the child aborted. Although she wants to have one one day and is already saving for it, she really wanted to be rid of it. Lise is sad about everything. ["Katta" was Katharina Stern, another of Kollwitz's nieces.]

[...]

October 31, 1920

Hans and Otty. They have been husband and wife since March of this year. Otty is now pregnant and tomorrow she is to have an abortion. Hans wants it, Otty just complies. Hans wants it mainly because he doesn't think he's mature enough to have a child. He says he is only at the beginning of freeing himself from all his inhibitions, a child would still be very stressful.

He is also still afraid to consider the bond between himself and Otty for life. In addition, there is probably also the pressure that he is not yet financially independent. So he has imposed his will on Otty and Otty complies. Very difficult, with a lot of self-reproach and brooding.

Otty is a kind, deep person. But also, like Hans, prone to brooding and heaviness. But I wish very much that they could stay together and have children. *Children* - not just a single unwanted child - no, wanted children. [...]

*[Kollwitz attended a conference on school reform, where she listened to a talk by Karl Wilker, the director of an institution for delinquent young men. Wilker had been an early member of the Wandervögel, a back-to-nature youth movement before the war that had fostered a degree of homosocial bonding. He made Lindenhof into a model of the new, more humanitarian Fürsorgeerziehung (corrective training), and he was a leading light in the Reformpädagogik (progressive education) movement. Here, Kollwitz described both Wilker's philosophy and the impression that his gender presentation made on her:]*

He is (strangely enough!) given the post of director at the Lindenhof reformatory. His first act is to have all the barred windows removed, abolish corporal punishment and treat the boys as moral equals. His guiding principle: *Man is good*. He lives completely with the boys, is always available to everyone, a kind of Francis of Assisi of love. He summoned his friends, who were all lined up to one side during his talk at the League of Nations.<sup>[2]</sup> Six vigorous young men with their arms folded under them, wearing colorful *Wandervogel* uniforms.

Wilker very soft, somewhat feminine. Feminine even in his suit too; a kind smile, cheerful eyes, big nose reminiscent of Peter (also the smile and the way he puts his head on one side), clean forehead. All in all, he seems like a wonderful person, but I don't like the somewhat feminine touch. The next day, one of his friends is with us, a handsome, dark young man.

Long conversation. Analogies with Blüher.<sup>[3]</sup> For him, too, the world is divided into the spiritual and the non-spiritual. The spiritual, that is his "work," life with men or boys, pure purposeful work.

On the other side is the woman who must never be allowed to do this work, whose only goal must be to be a mother.

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Confirmation of this young man's tendency towards a love for boys. Not in words, but through his views. A boy's love that perhaps keeps itself free of the materially sensual, that shifts everything into sublimated eroticism.

[...]

Mid-January 1922

On Sunday, January 15... Otilie quiet and depressed. Then Hans tells me, as he takes me to the train, that Otilie is pregnant again and that they have decided to have the fetus removed.

[...]

End of January 1922

[...]

Before Otilie went to the hospital to have an abortion, we went for a walk in the snowy forest together. Many things came out of her. She had probably become a mother too early, since giving birth she never felt physically up to scratch, one ailment always followed another. She couldn't have children all the time. The contraception had failed despite all the precautions she had taken. She was terribly fed up with everything. Hans told me later that she was also quite hypochondriacal, that she felt psychologically abnormal. If you put Hans' complaints and her complaints together, that doesn't sound very hopeful for the future and the thought comes to mind that it might have been better if they hadn't let little Peter be born back then; both of them would be free and could have gone their own way. Now they can't.

[...]

April 1922

Hans was here for a few hours. We talked like we used to, and Hans also talked about Otilie. He said she was so terribly tense. She's always worried about getting pregnant again and doesn't want to.

[...]

The ever-worsening economic conditions have a very inhibiting effect on having children. Most people want to *have a child*, even single people are brave in the face of all difficulties, as long as it is the first child. But by then it's usually over and I can't say I'm surprised. Getting married and having children now means running the household from morning till night like a working-class woman. Getting help is almost impossible. If I had lived in that generation, I wouldn't have had the help I had, I wouldn't have been able to work. My development would have been very different. That's quite clear. That's why young women who want to work artistically or scientifically are now feeling so much resentment.

Moreover, almost all of them are malnourished. Meat is too expensive. Hans and Otty, Josua and Anna-Erika, Hennes and Rele – what do they all look like? They all need fattening and care. A meal like in the Odenwald in Gronau. *Everything*-milk, eggs, meat, fat – is hardly affordable anymore.

[...]

Mid-May 1922

[...]

Went up to Wittekind<sup>[4]</sup> and found her mending stockings while her lunch was cooking on the gas stove.

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She showed me her work, in which she is beginning to go back to nature. Perhaps she is one of the few young women who can really live on their own. I don't mean without men, but in such a way that they don't find their center in men. Most women actually receive their life through men, or at least imagine it, enter into marriage and then become settled. Hedwig Wittekind perhaps manages to remain free, an artist, not needing anyone, a bohemian by nature. This is only possible for girls who are not very sensual. For sensual girls – I was one of them – are dominated by their sex. If I hadn't married Karl and thus undertaken an encapsulation of my sex drive that was often restrictive but on the whole happy and healthy, I would probably have used my singlehood badly. If someone had continued to woo me full of sensuality, my own would have been aroused immediately, and the sex drive would have dominated me worse than in marriage. That's how it dominates most girls.

[...]

But even if she has a child, Wittekind will remain primarily an artist. Regardless of the talk about how she models now, she would live the way she wants to. I used to think that girls could do that for a while, but afterwards – when they age – they present a pitiful picture. I no longer believe that either. This new type of girl is very attractive. The fact that no geniuses have emerged among girls up to the present day is also irrelevant to me now. It's not only geniuses who have the right to behave in such a single-minded way. Where is there a genius among painters now? Male artists can also be happy to produce respectable achievements, to be good artists and craftsmen. Women can do that too.

Hilde Schindler-Fuchs is still going the way I did. She marries in a civil ceremony, has two children, has duties and worries and troubles and sees how she can save her artistic life alongside them. Perhaps she couldn't have led a life like the one Wittekind chose. I could have led it, according to my inclination, but I think I would have failed because of my uncritical, slightly excited sensuality. Wittekind says she doesn't need people, maybe it's really true with her.

[...]

December 4, 1922

[...]

...my path is clear and evident, others take unclear paths. Plivier, for example, wants to go out in the spring, wander and preach. He wants to preach *action*, but inward action, turning away from life in its outdated, ill-trying forms, preparing the ground for a new, spiritually liberated life. He is already approaching [Leonhard] Stark and [Ludwig Christian] Haeusser, who in my opinion are crazy and evil people. False prophets. Then there are all the churches that preach a new eroticism (the "religious bohème").<sup>[5]</sup> This is reminiscent of the Anabaptists, of the times when – just as now – a turn of the world [*Weltwende*]<sup>[6]</sup> is proclaimed and the Millennial Kingdom is announced to be just around the corner. Compared to all these fantasists, my actions seem clear to me. I wish I could work like this for many years to come.

[...]

## NOTES

[1] Kollwitz's niece.

[2] The League for the League of Nations was a pacifist organization that lobbied for Germany's admission to the League of Nations.

[3] Hans Blüher chronicled the German youth movement-most controversially its homoerotic aspects-and moved in the same circles as Hans Kollwitz.

[4] Hedwig Wittekind was a sculptor and graphic artist.

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[5] Stark and Haeusser preached similar mixes of anarchist social organization and sexual liberation in the 1920s.

[6] This may be a reference to Rudolf von Delius' book *Weltwende* published in 1919.

Source: Käthe Kollwitz, *The Diaries*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz. East Berlin: Wolf Jobst Siedler Verlag, 1989, pp. 418, 434-35, 448, 451, 454, 461-62, 465, 470, 472, 484-89, 500-1, 504-05, 507, 520-22, 527-8, 533-4, 536, 542-43, 551-52, 568, 638-40, 646, 650-53, 659.

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