

Stanford professor reveals influence of German philosophers on current ideas of sex and marriage

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For their time, the German philosophers' ideas and theories about romance and marriage were 'strange in the extreme,' Assistant Professor Adrian Daub said. Credit: The Art Renewal Center

(Phys.org) -- The gay marriage debate has turned one of the most intimate human relationships into one of the most publicly discussed topics. Everyone from judges and religious leaders to voters are expected to form an opinion about whether two adults should be allowed to enter into a same-sex union.

In the late 1800's a group of prominent philosophers also debated the autonomous status of marriage, but with a very different agenda.

The poets and thinkers of the German Idealist and Romantic movements "insisted that marriage was

something beyond a contract, beyond a state institution, and beyond a civic or civil concern," said Adrian Daub, assistant professor of German Studies at Stanford.

At the same time, the German Romantics asserted that whatever in marriage was beyond these outside determinants was not religious in nature.

"It had to do with affect, it had to do with autonomy and its surrender, and it had to do with a special kind of fellowship," Daub added.

In his latest publication, [Uncivil Unions: The Metaphysics of Marriage in German Idealism and Romanticism](#), Daub reveals how the ideas of some of Germany's most influential scholars continue to shape ideas about gender, marriage and sex to the present day.

In today's gay marriage debate, "civil unions" are associated with gay relationships being somehow "everybody's business" said Daub. The Romantics, Daub noted, were more interested in "relationships that derived their justification entirely from themselves, rather than depending on licensing or legitimization from the outside."

Through an examination of the lives and works of philosophical luminaries such as G.W.F Hegel, J.G. Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, Daub found what he described as the "first group of people to think of marriage in an exclusively secular fashion."

By rejecting the easy answers provided by biology and theology, their theories set them apart from the previous two centuries of thought about marriage.

Although Daub initially "just liked the pun," 'Uncivil Unions' came to represent the larger themes of his

research.

What was unique about these philosophic theories is that they saw marriages as "unions that happen without reference - or reverence - to the wider community," Daub said. And ironically, it is that autonomy, unmanaged by political authority, that Daub said "serves to make them important to the wider community."

By willingly submitting to one another's desires, the philosophers reasoned that a marital union is a voluntary surrender of autonomy.

At the same time, the Romantics thought that autonomy was simply transferred to the larger unit, the couple. So, as Daub outlined, a similarly agreed upon partnership could "prevent the alienation that usually ensues when we commit ourselves to structures larger than ourselves, for example having a job, joining the military, signing a mortgage."

As innocuous as some of their theories may seem now, Daub described the works of the philosophers, poets and novelists who wrote about romance and marriage as "strange in the extreme." Prominent for their work in other fields, their treatises on relationships were particularly daring because the airing of such risqué matters was unheard of in their time.

Fichte graphically worried that by having intercourse women would lose their dignity in an appendix to his "Foundations of Natural Right" (1796). Schlegel and Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) devoted much of their writing to philosophical considerations of sex and marriage that drew heavily on their own autobiographies. Schlegel wrote about an adulterous affair, Novalis about the loss of his teenage fiancée.

Until now, academic documentation of the intellectual contributions from this fertile period of thought has generally neglected these theories of sex, marriage and their relationship to one another.

"A lot of scholarship on them is pretty much content to say that they're sexist and outdated - which they are, to be sure," said Daub. "But I wanted to show

that they can be suggestive, interesting and surprisingly current."

The philosophers came to view the romantic and cooperative union of two people as a social relationship that could serve as a scalable model for harmonious political organization. Friedrich Schleiermacher, for example, envisioned a religious community as an enlarged family. Similarly, Novalis thought that political constitutions have to make room for a "sense of family" (meaning of the state as a huge family). And the young Hegel wondered how one could use love to bring modern states closer to a Greek polis.

It's no coincidence that a generation of philosophers began to reflect on the institution of marriage at about the same time.

Many of Germany's greatest minds were at their scholarly prime as the French Revolution raised questions about personal autonomy.

The Revolution was built on the concept that human affairs could be emancipated from tradition and "rethought with deference to human reason and affect rather than entrenched authority," said Daub.

Marriage, with its religious strictures and traditions going back centuries, became a prime locus for such rethinking by the Romantics and Idealists.

With the important caveat that the Romantics were restricted by what was acceptable in their day, Daub said there are contiguous themes between their ideas and the "free love" communities that the hippies espoused in the 1960's.

"The idea that human affection has a wisdom of its own that should not or cannot effectively be reigned in by considerations of common sense," said Daub, "is one that connects [the German city] of Jena 1796 to Haight Ashbury 1968."

Although the thinkers and poets that Daub studied certainly "made a splash" in their day, the immediate impact of their erotic philosophies was negligible. In the case of the Idealists, people focused on other aspects of their work; in the case

of the Romantics, people didn't think they had a real philosophy behind their treatment of eroticism.

However, as Daub noted, their philosophies of sex and [marriage](#), "from Kierkegaard, to Marx, to Nietzsche, to Freudian psychoanalysis and fin-de-siècle sexology drew on them" and through these intermediaries, "their theories arguably shaped our modern view of sexuality more than any other group of thinkers."

Provided by Stanford University

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