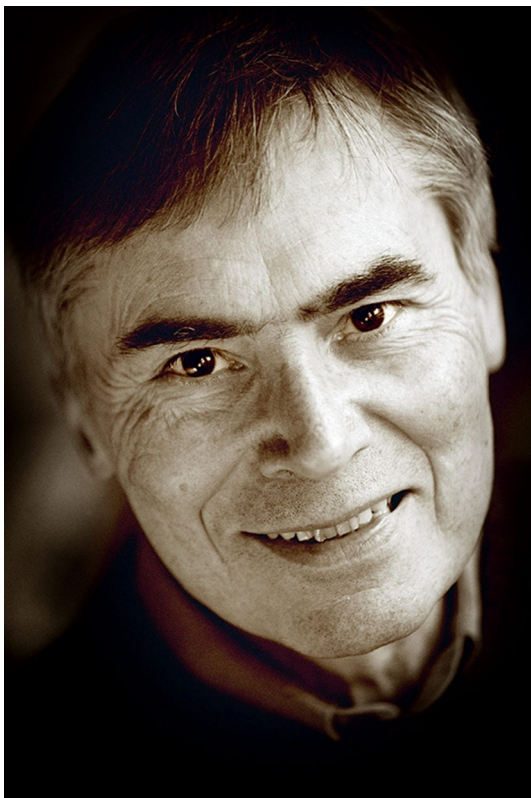


Preben Hertoft (1928–2017)

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This is an online talk about professor Preben Hertoft between Graugaard and Schmidt.¹

Graugaard. Let's talk about our old friend, Preben Hertoft, who died in February at the age of 89. After all, it was Preben who brought you and me together, and while he was my sexological mentor, I know that he was also a source of great inspiration to you. Personally, I first met Preben at the medical school of Copenhagen sometime in the late 1980s. I had begun studying medicine, because I wanted to come as close to the mysteries of human existence as possible. But to my grave disappointment, I soon discovered that there was not much human about all the body parts and cell morphologies we were expected to learn by heart. In consequence, I was increasingly frustrated and had a nagging feeling of wasting my time. By chance, I signed up for a voluntary course on basic sexology, and far away at the bottom of the huge auditorium I saw this petite and distinguished man sitting smilingly and relaxed on the lectern saying: "Human above all!"

This was the first time I heard anybody at the medical faculty say "human" without referring to organs or cellular processes. Finally! An esteemed teacher who talked so naturally about *whole* human beings with dreams, feelings, and desires. I fell a little in love with Preben right there, and my feeling for him never faded, although he could be demanding at times.

After the lecture, I contacted Preben's legendary secretary, Ellen Magrethe Geleff, and requested a meeting. I was soon invited to Preben's office, and he pulled a bottle of sherry out of the bottom drawer of his archive cabinet and started interviewing me about who I was and how I envisioned my future life as a doctor. I was in my early 20s, and a celebrated chief physician from Rigshospitalet (the University Hospital of Copenhagen) was curious about my background and aspirations. What a shock! A trainee period was soon arranged, and I

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became extremely fascinated by the sexological “experimentarium” that Preben had going at his newly opened clinic. The curiosity and pioneer spirit of the entire staff were simply mesmerizing.

Later, I wrote my Bachelor’s thesis under Preben’s supervision. And later again, I wrote a Master’s thesis about legal castration of “sexual deviants” in inter-war Denmark, which led directly to a Ph.D. grant after my graduation in 1994. In my Ph.D. thesis, I studied the medical history of sexuality during the 1920s and 1930s, a subject that had interested Preben for decades. But what about you, dear Gunter. How did you get to know Preben?

Schmidt. At first, I thought he was a sociologist. Soon after its appearance, I came across his two-volume book on youth sexuality, which he published in Danish in 1968.² With its international format—a lengthy English summary, the entire table section in English—the study was easy for foreigners to access. In the late 1960s, youth studies on sex and relationships boomed, and suddenly a taboo field was conquered by young researchers such as M. Schofield in England, J. Israel in Sweden, W. Simon and J. Gagnon in the U.S., H. Giese and myself in Germany, Preben in Denmark.

The Danish study is one of the largest and methodically most solid in this series, combining a questionnaire survey with personal interviews. It founded Preben’s reputation as a sex researcher in Scandinavia and in the Western world. It was obvious that a psychiatrist had conducted the study, and you noticed that he not only depicted sex in tables, but also in carefully selected sexual biographies.

Over a period of 40 years, we often saw each other and—something which is hardly imaginable today—we exchanged hundreds of letters. We spoke and corresponded in English; Preben understood German well, but he did not like to speak it. He was 12 years old when German troops occupied his country and 17 when Denmark was freed in May 1945. In his memoirs,³ he published his diary notes from April and May 1945 with no commentaries. On May 4, he wrote: “Denmark is free. I heard on the radio that German occupation troops capitulated. We walked down the street and saw many people with the Dannebrog flags. They yelled Hurrah and congratulated each other.”

When Preben published his youth study in 1968, he had just entered a position as a psychiatrist at the prestigious “Rigshospitalet.” He was already dreaming of founding Denmark’s first sexological clinic. However, the realization of this dream lasted almost 20 years. What, do you think, moved him to implement his plan with such great patience and obstinacy?

Graugaard. That’s a great question, and actually Preben tried to answer it several times himself, both in talks and in various memoir texts. For one thing, he was born in 1928, right at the point when The Roaring Twenties collapsed in the economic depres-

sion and political totalitarianism of the 1930s. He was five years old when Hitler became Chancellor, and the sexual liberalism of Hirschfeld’s Weimar Republic came to a sudden stop. Somehow, this alarming political and moral transition became a psychological template in Preben’s life, and, as he grew up in an increasingly puritan Denmark, he idealized the pioneers of the sexual reform movement and became keen on restoring a bit of the lost pre-war innocence. He later wrote extensively on Magnus Hirschfeld, Norman Haire, and Jonathan Leunbach, among many others.⁴ To Preben, these were the true heroes of modernity, and I think he somehow viewed his own project as a natural extension of theirs.

Also, Preben was adopted, which he found out by accident in his late teens. So, questions of belonging, attachment, identity, ambivalence, loss, and love had a special significance to him. Arguably, this was why he became a psychiatrist in the first place and indeed a major reason for his lifelong interest in intimacy and erotic interactions. Like Kinsey, he never concealed that he was driven by personal motivations, doubts, fears, and curiosity; he was not the least ashamed to draw on his own experiences or shortcomings when discussing clinical or theoretical matters. “I know this feeling from myself,” he would suddenly say. Pure Kinsey style! Such a dynamic and investigative approach to sexology was a true blessing for his younger colleagues. And, I am sure, for his patients. Did he ever talk to you about his background or his motives for studying sex and sexuality?

Schmidt. No, we never talked about that. Beyond the scientific seriousness, we were playful and flippant together, and somehow, we managed to combine familiarity and brittleness. I always sensed that Preben was a “primary” sex researcher. These are—in my homemade typology—colleagues whose biographical conflicts and breaches give their research efforts vitality, intensity, and direction, like you just described it. The “secondary” sex researchers, on the other hand, enter sexual science (almost) by accident; they could just as well have been successful in other fields. Researchers such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in the nineteenth century and Alfred Kinsey or John Money in the twentieth century, just to name a few, were obviously “primary,” as their personal biographies clearly show.

We find all three core features of the “primary” sexologist in Preben: He was an ardent *anti-conventionalist* and thus always political. His essays testify to this with titles such as “Den rebelske fugl” (“The rebellious bird”). He was a *universalist*, not specialized in particulars, but concerned with the complexity of sexuality. And he was *curious* about the field and knew the diverse sexual scenes of his city and elsewhere. These were important sources of knowledge to him.

Graugaard. Interesting thoughts. I wonder, how you and I fit into your homemade typology! But, for sure, Preben was a great admirer of Ulrichs, Kinsey, and Money, and we should certainly add Magnus Hirschfeld. As you well know, Hirschfeld made little distinction between life and work and he spent his

² Hertoft (1968).

³ Hertoft (2001).

⁴ Hertoft (1988).

turbulent career tightrope walking between activism and science. A dangerous balance act that may end up threatening the credibility of both. Appropriately enough, Preben saw Hirschfeld as a front-runner of sexual education, therapy, health, and rights, and although he acknowledged Richard von Krafft-Ebing as the “father” of sexology, his own temperament was much more “Weimarian,” much more eclectic and activist than most psychiatrists of his day. He even kept a small bust of Magnus Hirschfeld in his office—a sketch of the original that was destroyed by the Nazis in 1933.

Another key figure for Preben was obviously Sigmund Freud, and although he never underwent any formal psychoanalytic training, his theoretical framework was highly influenced by psychodynamic thinking. He was a true master of unraveling the subtle layers of sexual or relational problems. He was a master of listening carefully, patiently, and empathetically, and of using the electricity of the doctor–patient relationship to spark therapeutic progress. When I began my Ph.D. study in 1994, Preben invited me on a pilgrimage to Berggasse 19, which he believed to be an appropriate excursion for a young sexologist *in spe*. Preben wandered around Freud’s Vienna apartment as an old friend of the house, and you expected Martha to serve the “wiener mélange” any moment. It was a really moving experience.

Preben certainly had his heroes, and many of them became mine too. At the same time, however, he remained curious. He was enthusiastic about the social constructionist writings of Foucault and Simon and Gagnon, and he embraced the late-modern sociology of Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, and our own Henning Bech. It was pretty obvious, however, that he didn’t feel completely at home in radical constructionism and queer theory—he was worried that too much deconstruction would undermine the quintessential “human” and leave people lonely and confused. Or even cynical and detached from the emotional stability of obligating relationships. But he never became grumpy, and the only thing he unambiguously denounced was “pop sexologists” and biological determinists. He considered “quick fixes” of any kind both naïve and dangerous.

Schmidt. Preben had an adorably antiquated side. His extensive textbook, “Klinisk sexologi” (“Clinical sexology”),⁵ which appeared in three editions and several translations between 1976 and 1987 became a standard work throughout Scandinavia, was a one-person book—he had a breadth of view, was clinically acquainted with all sorts of problems and disturbances, and was a clinical universalist too. In 1989, the book was successfully published in German. The first edition of Preben’s textbook was released a decade before the Copenhagen clinic was founded in 1986. From where has Preben collected these broad experiences, what is the prehistory of sexology at Rigshospitalet?

Graugaard. As newly appointed chief psychiatrist, Preben became inspired by Kaplan’s (1974) “The New Sex Therapy” and wanted to import her ideas to Scandinavia. Consequently, he initiated a so-called Cohabitation group of young doctors,

psychologists, and social workers, who would explore sex therapy on patients and, I guess, themselves. However, the psychiatric department was highly patriarchal and old-school, and Preben’s silent revolution was not at all embraced by his senior colleagues. Luckily, he got tailwind from medical students and younger staff members, and through frequent appearances in the media, he made a popular name for himself too. So gradually, he gained ground and in April 1986—after years of clever political maneuvering—the first public sexological clinic in Denmark was opened under his leadership.

Schmidt. No doubt, Preben was fascinated by Masters and Johnson’s innovative approach to the treatment of sexual dysfunctions in the 1960s and the psychodynamic and couple dynamic “remastering” of this approach by Helen Kaplan and others in the 1970s. But I think that, for him, sexual dysfunctions were just a part of everyday clinical sexology, his therapeutic and theoretical enthusiasm and challenges lay in unusual sexualities and perversions, sex offenders, trans-persons, and the health and rights of sexual minorities. The situation for gays and lesbians, just to name a few, was even in Denmark catastrophic in the 1960s, when Preben came to Rigshospitalet. His clinical interests resembled those of his German colleague, Hans Giese, who began to rebuild sex research in Germany after the war and whom Preben respected a lot. I believe that such key issues allowed him to profile sexology at the large psychiatric university clinic. But whatever happened after Preben’s retirement from the Copenhagen clinic in 1997?

Graugaard. Well, you know. It’s never easy when grand old men and women step down. And when Preben retired, a great deal of the staff left the clinic too. Those were turbulent years. But even if the clinic eventually lost its administrative autonomy, it is still alive, and in 2014 Dr. Annamaria Giraldi was appointed professor of clinical sexology at the University of Copenhagen. Good news for Danish sexology! And luckily, Preben lived to enjoy it. Likewise, he was delighted when I was headhunted to a new position as professor of general sexology at Aalborg University in 2012. The same year, we launched our Center for Sexuality Research, and Preben talked beautifully at the festive opening. He clearly felt both proud and comforted that Danish sexology thrived and that *two* Danish universities now had sexological chairs. This was also the last time he spoke publicly. Unfortunately, dementia had already begun to take its toll. But I am curious to know, Gunter, what you have learned from Preben—and how his legacy, in your mind, may be relevant to current-day sexology?

Schmidt. “Legacy” is a commanding word that does not really fit Preben’s core virtue, *modesty*. It is easier for me to say what I particularly liked about him and what particularly touched me. Preben had a soft spot for the sexually colorful, for the strange and excluded, and for people struggling and suffering sexually. He had a rare understanding for them and got to know them better than anyone. In addition, I miss the beautiful and lively cele-

⁵ Hertoft (1976).

brations at his house, where his wife Nanna, as the night wore on, would show us her latest weavings in her big workshop.

Graugaard. You're right, Preben would have hated the word "legacy." He would have made a joke. To me, Preben's heritage boils down to this: Be curious. Be humble. Know your history and don't repeat its mistakes. Don't fear uncertainty, ambivalence, and doubt. Take your time. Embrace diversity. Know when to listen and when to talk. Know that sometimes you will fail. Know that sometimes patients can't be helped. Know that science is but one gaze at sexuality and broaden your professional horizon with literature, music, and art. Be yourself and accept that you may never know for sure, who that is.

I carry Preben with me to work every day, and I often think to myself: "How would 'chefen' ('the boss') have handled this?" His curiosity, pragmatism, and commonsense help me balance

the absolutism of laboratory science with the relativism of radical queer. In Preben's mind, sexologists should appreciate the extremes, but avoid extremism. I really like that.

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