



**Robert Beachy.** *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity.* New York: Knopf, 2014. xix + 305 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-307-27210-2.



**Laurie Marhoefer.** *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 340 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4426-4915-6; \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4426-2657-7.

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It is an exciting time to be a historian of sexuality in the German context. The two books reviewed here make their interventions in the history of homosexual emancipation and the changing sexual cultures of late Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic at a time of prodigious scholarship. As well as Robert Beachy's and Laurie Marhoefer's works, books published over the last few years include Robert Tobin's *Peripheral Desires: The German Discovery of Sex* (2015), Marti Lybeck's *Desiring Emancipation: New Women and Homosexuality in Germany, 1890-1933* (2014), Clayton Whisnant's *Queer Identities and Politics in Germany: A History, 1880-1945* (2016), and Norman Domeier's *The Eulenburg Affair: A Cultural History of Politics in the German Empire* (2015).

Beachy's *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity*, which has also been translated into German (with the disappointingly discreet title *Das andere Berlin*), argues for the centrality of the German context (and especially Berlin) in the emergence of a homosexual identity based on the notion of a fixed sexual orientation. Ac-

ording to the author, the German situation was unique because of the confluence of four factors: the adoption of the Prussian sodomy statute in the unified German legal code in 1871 (paragraph 175); the research of German-language forensic and psychiatric professionals; public engagement against paragraph 175, and a relatively free press (p. xv).

Beachy charts the emergence and rise of this (male) homosexual identity over the course of half a century, from Karl Heinrich Ulrich's passionate defense of same-sex desire in 1867 (described by Beachy as "the first public coming-out in modern history", p. 5) to the lively gay scene of 1920s Weimar Berlin, and the sex tourism which it encouraged. Beachy brings together a wide range of material, including nineteenth-century medical literature, early ethnographic case studies of homosexual sociability, letters and articles from the homosexual press, prosecution records, literary autobiographies, and newspaper reportage. Some of his case studies are already well documented, including the Eulenburg scandal

and the impact of Hans BlÃ¼her's work on the youth movement as a *MÃ¤nnerbund* (male association); these chapters do not offer much in the way of new insights. However, Beachy does a commendable job throughout of disentangling the myriad organizations, periodicals, and splinter groups that made up the homosexual emancipation movement. This culminates in his final chapter, "Weimar Politics and the Struggle for Legal Reform," which analyzes the power struggle between different wings of the movement, and charts the ultimately unsuccessful attempts to repeal or liberalize paragraph 175.

In his strongest chapter, "Policing Homosexuality in Berlin," Beachy shifts the focus, offering a fascinating account of the role played by police commissioners Leopold von Meerscheidt-HÃ¶llessem and his successor Hans von Tretschow in the expansion of Berlin's homosexual scene. Set up by HÃ¶llessem in 1885, the "Department of Homosexuals" formalized a strategy of relative tolerance, whereby homosexual fraternization in certain bars in Berlin was permitted by the police. This was an expedient strategy, intended to concentrate the surveillance of same-sex desiring men, in light of the fact that with Berlin's urban growth it was not feasible for the police to monitor every park and public space. But by allowing the proliferation of bars that catered predominantly to a same-sex desiring audience to go unchecked, police officials fostered the growth of a homosexual community, and in so doing "gave life to a theoretical construct" (p. 56). By liaising with medical researchers—even giving exclusive tours of bars and costume balls—police officials made Berlin into "a kind of laboratory of sexuality" (p. 56), in the process helping "to define and eventually entrench an incipient identity" (p. 84).

While Beachy is generally persuasive in his argumentation, there remains the occasional claim in need of further justification. Beachy nicely explicates the "feedback loop" that existed between medical researchers and the "homosexual street"; it was this "circuit of subjective self-avowal and medical study" that "fashioned a new sexual identity" (p. xvii). But I am not convinced that this offers us a new framework in opposition to the putatively "completely one-sided and misleading" image bequeathed to us by Michel Foucault, that of a "laboratory test tube in which medical professionals concocted new sexual identities" (p. xv). Here, we might wish to distinguish between the one-dimensional and top-down models employed by some historians claiming to apply Foucauldian insights, and what Foucault actually suggested himself, which appears at least to this reviewer as a much more dynamic model, entailing bottom-up resistance as

much as top-down disciplinary power.

While the individuals highlighted by Beachy are indeed remarkable, the author does at times indulge in rather laudatory or sentimental language. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs is characterized as a "brave and lonely soul" (p. 40), while we are told that Magnus Hirschfeld's "true genius" was to "combine almost seamlessly his science and activism" (p. 186). Conversely, one of Hirschfeld's main challengers for leadership of the homosexual emancipation movement, Friedrich Radszuweit, is described as a "conquering imperialist" (p. 233). Beachy applauds Hirschfeld's "strategic essentialism," referring to his "commitment to biological determinism as an explanation for homosexuality" (p. 186). I found this claim strange; Beachy himself recognizes just how deep-seated Hirschfeld's intellectual commitment to this model was, as opposed to being merely a strategically useful stance. Less comfortable aspects of Hirschfeld's work, not least his eugenicist convictions, are dealt with more squarely in Marhoefer's book.

Because Beachy's central preoccupation is with the establishment and growth of a homosexual identity, it is this identity that is foregrounded in his book. This has the benefit of making his work accessible to the nonspecialist, but does come at the cost of a more theoretically innovative account. In passing, Beachy refers to business owners choosing to advertise in Weimar-era homosexual journals as "gay, lesbian or straight" (p. 191), and states that as many as a third of male prostitutes "professed to be heterosexual" (p. 189). But did business owners in 1920s Berlin really subscribe to categories such as gay, lesbian, or straight? Did male prostitutes, predominantly from working-class backgrounds, really define themselves on the basis of their sexual activity? If so, Beachy does not explain how this developed, since according to the author it was the middle-class reception of the homosexual press that was central to the formation of a modern homosexual identity.

Beachy is firmly wedded to an identity—a modern identity with which we are already familiar and which he traces back into the past—and this restricts the type of stories that he can tell about the sexual past. For example, the reader is told that Magnus Hirschfeld's later work was responsible for untangling "the nineteenth-century conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity" (p. 170), thus laying the groundwork for Harry Benjamin's later understanding of transsexual, creating "the essential foundation for the improved terminology and clearer understanding that was to come" (p. 179). Yet we

are not forced to structure our accounts around a framework that assumes such understandings become clearer and improved over time. Instead, we might try to avoid this somewhat teleological gaze, looking for entanglements of sex and gender as opposed merely to their disentangling; or for other manifestations that do not fit the model of a sexual identity—based on fixed sexual orientation alone—unfolding through the twentieth century.[1] Given that Hirschfeld’s model of “sexual intermediacy” allowed, according to Beachy, “an infinite range of orientations and a wild diversity of human sexuality,” I felt that there were perhaps more exciting (and queerer?) stories to be told here (p. 88).

Laurie Marhoefer adopts a very different approach in *Sex and The Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and The Rise of the Nazis*. She does not seek to historicize a homosexual identity, but to offer an entangled history of non-normative sexualities and gender expressions, informed by what she calls a “queer methodological approach” (p. 8). Rather than telling the story of the unfolding of a specific homosexual identity, she seeks instead to generate a history of immorality (*Unsittlichkeit*), drawing on both women and men, and including homosexuality, prostitution, obscene media, birth control, and abortion (p. 8). This does not quite produce a “complete account” of sexual politics in the Weimar Republic (p. 9), for she does not consider all forms of immorality; as she admits, the book has little to say on heterosexual reproductive sex (p. 16). Nevertheless, Marhoefer’s book is bold, ambitious, and thoroughly deserving of a wide readership.

*Sex and The Weimar Republic* is organized around a central contention: that the successes of sexual reformers, and homosexual emancipationists in particular, created a “particular type of sexual freedom, one that liberated a majority of people” but that this came at the cost of “a disorderly minority” (p. 3). According to Marhoefer, this “Weimar settlement on sexual politics” is important not least because it shaped a type of sexual liberation that subsequently became “an influential model for the rest of the twentieth century” (p. 19). Under the terms of this settlement, “some forms of non-normative sexuality” were tolerated “so long as they remained largely out of the public eye” (p. 202). There were exceptions to this settlement—debates on divorce and abortion—but under its aegis, “almost Germans—including many gay men and lesbians—came to enjoy greater toleration.” But the liberation of some men who had sex with men “came at the expense of other men who had sex with men,” especially sex workers and those unwilling or unable to

restrict their sexuality and gender transgression to the private sphere (pp. 207-208).

Through her thesis of the “Weimar settlement,” Marhoefer successfully challenges those who claim that the politics of “homonormativity” is a recent development, an aberration in the history of homosexual politics. But Marhoefer also seeks to intervene in the historiographical debate about the Weimar Republic’s political culture more widely. According to the author, focusing on sexual politics reveals a surprising degree of political consensus. The history of sexual politics therefore shows “not an unstable, conflict-ridden Republic, but rather a functional and durable democracy,” at least until 1930 (p. 10). Others have criticized this argument as overstated. Julia Roos reminds us that liberalization of prostitution law in 1927 (the focus of Marhoefer’s third chapter) had significant limitations and was only temporary in nature; and she argues that it also led to a “right-wing backlash,” which constituted “an important facet of the destruction of Weimar democracy.”[2]

While one might certainly disagree about the relative significance of the 1927 liberalization, Marhoefer’s final chapter offers a compelling case for calling the “backlash thesis” into question. She shows that sexual politics did not drive significant numbers of voters to the Nazi Party, nor convince the Catholic Centre Party to back Hitler. Other issues, economic distress and anticommunism among them, were more important, and Nazi propaganda did not heavily feature “immorality” in the early 1930s (p. 179). As Marhoefer states, the Nazi Party did not possess an advantage over conservative parties in the field of sexual politics; in fact, it had to deal with a disadvantage, the homosexual scandal around the SA chief of staff Ernst Röhm. However, as her fifth chapter argues, this disadvantage was surprisingly limited in nature. According to Marhoefer, the national media’s restrained reaction to Röhm’s sexuality reveals that it was quite possible by the early 1930s for mainstream journalists to treat allegations of homosexuality as simply not a matter of public concern. This would have been unthinkable outside of Germany, another indication of the influence of the “Weimar settlement on sexual politics” (p. 148).

Unsurprisingly, given the laudable ambition and scope of this book, certain themes and case studies are dealt with in less depth than others. I would have liked to read more about the impact of the First World War as distinct from the revolution of 1918-19. Marhoefer cites Jason Crouthamel’s work on the wartime service of same-sex desiring soldiers, but does not engage with his argu-

ment that their front experience may have contributed to an emotional and psychological liberation, as well as led to a rise of militaristic language in the homosexual emancipation movement.[3] Further detail would also have been desirable about Marhoefer's queer approach, because at times queer seems to be used here simply as a synonym for homosexual, gay, or men who had sex with men (and therefore deployed in an ontological as opposed to methodological fashion). As Laura Doan has noted, works of queer history often dispense with the homo-hetero binary only to replace it with an equally problematic framework of normal/deviant.[4] I am not sure that Marhoefer's attempt to evade this pitfall—the contention, buried in a footnote, that both conservative and left-leaning people understood the distinction between moral and immoral, normal and abnormal sexualities as fundamental (p. 221)—is entirely successful.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the case of Aloys Dämon, cited by both Beachy and Marhoefer. A male prostitute, Dämon was imprisoned in 1927 after one of his homosexual clients, Otto Zählh, committed suicide. Dämon remained imprisoned after the Nazis came to power, and was probably forced to undergo a sterilization operation (Marhoefer, p. 145). According to Marhoefer, the trends which led to Dämon being characterized as a degenerate criminal also led to the Reichstag committee vote to repeal paragraph 175, in part because Magnus Hirschfeld and many of his colleagues in the homosexual emancipation movement were prepared to accept the division between admittedly sick but otherwise respectable men like Zählh, and their degenerate and criminal victimizers such as Dämon (p. 143). This is used by Marhoefer once again to underline her thesis of the Weimar settlement: tolerance for some minorities but a tolerance which came at a price for other sexual outsiders, such as Dämon. His fate informs her conclusion, in which Marhoefer reminds us that the history of homosexual politics is not just one of uplift or sacrifice but also a history troubled by violences, exclusions and hierarchies (p. 216).

In her excellent book, Marhoefer has certainly succeeded in drawing attention to the what she calls the complexity and ugliness of homosexual emancipation (p. 217). At the same time, she ends up reproducing a

dynamic common in the field of gay, lesbian, and queer history. According to Heather Love, as queer readers we tend to see ourselves as reaching back toward isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them; this is the heroic aspect to our work of historical recovery.[5] What Beachy does for the much better known Hirschfeld, or for Ulrichs, Marhoefer does for Aloys Dämon, one of the small and relatively disadvantaged group of people who have been largely forgotten and who will hopefully now be remembered (p. 217). It seems that whether we choose to identify with traditional homosexual heroes such as Hirschfeld, or downtrodden sexual outcasts such as Dämon, the impulse to recover, to remember, to valorize, remains as strong as ever, whether we call our histories gay or queer.[6]

#### Notes

[1]. See further Stephen Valocchi, "Where Did Gender Go? Same-Sex Desire and the Persistence of Gender in Gay Male Historiography," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 4 (2012): 453-479.

[2]. "Guest Post: Julia Roos Response to Laurie Marhoefer," Weimar Studies Network website, November 24, 2015, <https://weimarstudies.wordpress.com/2015/11/24/guest-post-julia-roos-response-to-laurie-marhoefer/>. Accessed August 26, 2016.

[3]. Jason Crouthamel, "We Need Real Men: The Impact of the Front Experience on Homosexual Front Soldiers," in his *An Intimate History of the Front* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 121-146 (122 and 128).

[4]. Laura Doan, *Disturbing Practices: History, Sexuality and Women's Experience of Modern War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 79.

[5]. Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 8 and 33.

[6]. On the similar genealogical impulses in both gay and lesbian and queer historiographies, see further Doan, *Disturbing Practices*.

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