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London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Craig Griffiths, *The Ambivalence of Gay Liberation: Male Homosexual Politics in 1970s West Germany*

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German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLV, No. 1 (May 2023), 152–9

ISSN 0269-8552

CRAIG GRIFFITHS, *The Ambivalence of Gay Liberation: Male Homosexual Politics in 1970s West Germany*, Studies in German History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 256 pp. ISBN 978 0 198 86896 5. £72.00

This study by Craig Griffiths is a stellar case in point for the old historians' joke that only two kinds of historiographical truth exist: it started earlier – and it's more complicated than that. By placing gay men's ambivalence about themselves, their desires, their politics, and the society in which they lived at the heart of his book, Griffiths complicates the standard narrative of gay liberation, disturbing 'a well-told story of shame giving way to pride, subjugation transforming into freedom, and fear blossoming into hope' (p. 9). He foregrounds continuities instead of ruptures and consequently challenges 1968–9 – the pinnacle of the West German students' movement and the year of homosexual law reform – as marking a sharp historical divide. The book under review is not only the first in-depth English-language study of male homosexual politics in 1970s West Germany, but also an engaging read and a successful attempt at queering the history of the gay movement and of the 1970s in West Germany.

In the introduction, Griffiths situates his study in the German history of homosexual emancipation. He discusses his use of terminology, respecting contemporary usage of terms such as 'gay' or 'homosexual', but also considering men who desired other men but did not identify through their sexuality. He also theorizes the central term of his study – ambivalence – drawing on recent work in queer affect studies as well as classic psychoanalytical theory. Griffiths runs the axes of pride/shame, normal/different, and hope/fear through the histories of West Germany and German homosexual emancipation to develop a working model of ambivalence for his purposes.

In chapter one, 'The West German Gay World after Homosexual Law Reform', Griffiths argues that gay liberation's 'struggle for space, language, and communication: for a public' (p. 31) began with the other two effects of law reform: the emergence of a commercial gay press and of a gay scene that was also mostly commercial, including bars, cruising sites, and travel. He points out the limits of law reform: despite the 1969 and 1973 reforms, gay activists continued to be banned from public spaces, the age of consent remained higher for sex

between men, and although according to polls fewer people regarded homosexuality as a sin, a growing number viewed it as an illness. He thus concludes compellingly that liberalization left homosexuals with much to be desired, and that historians' interpretations of sexual law reform as 'a deep socio-cultural caesura' 'simply do not hold water when one focuses on homosexuality' (p. 39). Griffiths's analysis of the gay press shows the ambivalent terrain that publications like *him* and *du&ich* navigated between the pre-1969 homophile culture and the post-law reform world that was just emerging. In their denigration of rent boys and feminine gay men, they continued homophile respectability politics. But the commercial gay press was now also openly critical of mainstream society. The gay scene expanded rapidly after law reform, and guidebooks soon helped those interested in orienting themselves in the gay venues of various West German cities. Despite activists' criticism of the commercialism of the gay scene, Griffiths concludes, both activism and commercial ventures helped men find their place in the gay world.

In chapter two, Griffiths traces the emergence of gay liberation in the years from 1969 to 1973. During this period, homophile and gay activism overlapped and contended over whether and how to attempt to change mainstream attitudes towards homosexuality. Griffiths characterizes the politics of this moment as 'exceedingly fraught', engendering an 'ambivalence [that] ran through the very heart of organizations, publications, and individuals themselves' (p. 59). The chapter's analysis draws on media coverage of homosexuality from mainstream as well as homophile and gay media, such as two television documentaries that ran in 1970 and 1972, two cover stories of mainstream weekly *Der Spiegel* dedicated to homosexuality from 1969 and 1973, and the discussions and repercussions following Rosa von Praunheim's famous 1971 film *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, but the Society in Which He Lives*. Griffiths describes the differences in strategies and self-presentation between the bourgeois International Homophile World Organization – whose name belied its character as a West German national body – and the gay action groups that began forming in the early 1970s. He is careful not to replicate the gay students' rejection and mockery of the 1970s homophile activists, who, despite their cautious politics, faced the public before any gay action

groups existed. Griffiths argues that the tense relationship between the two groups, which became most publicly pronounced during the podium discussion following the 1973 broadcast of Praunheim's film on national television, had to do with a mutual suspicion of each other's politics and lifestyle.

The third chapter, 'Gay Liberation, "1968", and the Alternative Left', contextualizes the gay politics of the 1970s through the 1960s new left and the 1970s alternative left. Griffiths argues that the perspectives and spaces opened up by the West German student movement, commonly referred to by the cipher '1968', profoundly influenced the homosexual politics that emerged in the ensuing decade. This influence did not come about through the students' concern with homosexual politics, which they largely dismissed in much the same way as feminist politics. However, they 'bequeathed to the gay left a foundational scepticism about the nature of liberalization in capitalist societies' (p. 95). If no good could come from a structurally rotten order, progressive reforms were futile since they fell short of revolutionary politics. Griffiths traces this dividing line between the gay left and more conservative homosexuals right back to '1968'. As a consequence, the gay left remained sceptical of homosexual law reform or dismissed it altogether, along with the politics of the social-liberal government coalition between 1969 and 1982 and liberalization in general. As Griffiths points out, the gay left's criticism of liberalization meant that they felt right at home within the alternative left in the 1970s, which rejected both the capitalist system and Soviet Communism. Apart from ideological proximity, the alternative left crucially provided the gay left with a space for political work and a (counter)public to address.

In the fourth chapter, Griffiths unpacks the pink triangle and the complicated ways in which it served to link past and present persecution, explaining how '[t]he most radical exclusionary act committed against homosexuals in German history became, 40 years on, a key means of their inclusion' (p. 128). He provides a convincing reading of the reclaimed symbol originally used by the Nazis to identify homosexual camp inmates and adopted by gay activists in the 1970s, first in Germany and then internationally. Although they were aware immediately after 1945 that homosexual men had been imprisoned in

camp, neither historians nor the homophile press showed any interest in the issue or the survivors until the 1970s, when the 1972 publication of Heinz Heger's memoir *The Men with the Pink Triangle: The True Life-and-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps* sparked what Griffiths calls a 'transnational "memory boom" in homosexual politics' (p. 126). Gay liberation activists adopted the pink triangle for different purposes: as a symbol that could increase gay visibility and act as an expression of solidarity by those gays who did not want to confront the public in drag, and as a symbol of shared oppression. The author contextualizes the activists' rhetoric of a looming repetition of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals in their own West German society as not only an expression of the 'Weimar symptom'—the fear that the young Federal Republic might suffer the same fate as the Weimar Republic—but also an instance of comparing present injustices with Nazi crimes, a practice that had become common in the 1960s among both leftists and conservatives. Griffiths suggests 'focusing on victimization [as] less a tactical move than an almost instinctive emotional and ideological response to a contemporary society that was experienced as oppressive' (p. 149). Rather than replacing gay pride with victimhood, the pink triangle could thus stand for both, Griffiths concludes, while at the same time allowing activists to make the 'extremely powerful claim' to the West German state and society '[t]hat gay liberation was a necessary part of "coming to terms with the past"' (p. 162).

The fifth chapter, 'Thinking and Feeling Homosexuality', discusses the role of effeminacy, sex and desire, and emotional politics for the gay left in the 1970s. Long-standing conflicts over gay male effeminacy erupted during the so-called *Tuntenstreit*, a strategic debate within the gay left concerning the value of drag and gender transgression. In it, the Homosexual Action Group West Berlin and other gay liberation groups argued about whether to form an alliance primarily with the women's movement on the basis of a gay identity or with the workers' struggle in prioritizing the socialist revolution. In discussing the role of sex and desire in gay politics, Griffiths highlights the fraught relationship between gay politics and the gay scene, with the latter more often than not being denigrated as a distraction from political goals. This antipathy, he argues convincingly, 'resembled an important point of

connection between gay action groups and organizations that still used the term “homophile” (p. 165). Griffiths’s account of the emotional politics of gay liberation is based on his analysis of discussions of the gay scene in different gay action groups and self-help groups as well as therapeutic work. He concludes that emotions such as fear and shame had not disappeared, but instead constituted important emotional continuities throughout the decade.

In the conclusion, the 1979 ‘Homolulu’ convention and the 1980 podium discussion on gay politics with representatives of West Germany’s political parties in Bonn serve as springboards for Griffiths’s discussion of developments that accompanied gay politics throughout the 1970s, but became more pronounced in the 1980s. These were a turn to parliamentary politics, to a language of civil and human rights, and to state funding. He leaves readers with the conclusion that ambivalence about the meaning of gay desire and homosexuality itself can be considered ‘a structural feature of gay liberation’ (p. 216).

Griffiths’s book was the first to appear among a number of recent studies in queer German contemporary history, with Benno Gammerl’s *Anders fühlen* and Samuel Huneke’s *States of Liberation* following shortly after. With these studies, as well as Magdalena Beljan’s 2014 *Rosa Zeiten*, there is now a solid historiography of West German gay male politics and subjectivities in and beyond the 1970s.¹ Though this scholarly achievement is nothing less than thrilling, the continuing dearth of studies of lesbian, trans*, and other non-normatively sexual and gendered politics and subjectivities is becoming increasingly egregious. While we do not wish to admonish any single historian for this, it is urgent that the field address this imbalance.

In his focus on ambivalence and its repercussions in questioning narratives of pride overcoming shame, Griffiths shares a key interest with Benno Gammerl, who in his 2021 landmark study *Anders fühlen* called for ‘the historical and biographical significance of ambivalent

¹ Benno Gammerl, *Anders fühlen: Schwules und lesbisches Leben in der Bundesrepublik. Eine Emotionsgeschichte* (Munich, 2021); Samuel Clowes Huneke, *States of Liberation: Gay Men Between Dictatorship and Democracy in Cold War Germany* (Toronto, 2022); Magdalena Beljan, *Rosa Zeiten? Eine Geschichte der Subjektivierung männlicher Homosexualität in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren der BRD* (Bielefeld, 2014).

feelings' to be acknowledged.² Furthermore, both Gammerl and Griffiths argue that the perspective of homosexual history revises standard narratives of West German contemporary history, such as the paradigm of liberalization, an argument similarly put forward by Samuel Huneke in his recent *States of Liberation*. Despite its references to affect, Griffiths's book is a carefully argued movement history rather than an emotional history. One of its key contributions may be to make affect studies productive for a political movement history.

The book is also a comprehensive and critical historiography that is as keenly aware of existing narratives as it is eager to deconstruct them. More precisely, Griffiths demonstrates compellingly how a focus on gay history changes standard narratives of contemporary history, such as liberalization. The author carefully and convincingly analyses an impressive number and range of sources, including activist paraphernalia, oral history interviews, gay travel guides, works of literature, the commercial gay magazines *him* and *du&ich*, and coverage of gay liberation in the alternative left as well as the mainstream press. His lucidly written account extends beyond West Berlin, also taking into consideration a number of smaller West German cities and thus contributing to a much-needed geographical widening of the country's gay movement. He also notes the increasingly global range of West German gays and points out colonial continuities in gay male fantasies and travels, which reinforced long-standing racial stereotypes (pp. 54–5).

Some questions remain after reading Griffiths's engaging account. First, while he turns to psychoanalysis for his definition of ambivalence—'a window into the juncture between the psychic and the social, in that while the individual psychic conflict is significant, the individual is more or less susceptible to ambivalence depending on their social situation' (p. 18)—why does psychoanalytic theory not resurface in the rest of the book? Second, particularly in the discussion of the *Tuntenstreit*, we could ask how a trans* historical perspective (rather than a merely gay political framework) would change our analysis of the meaning of non-normative embodiments of gender? Griffiths states that 'there is no clear evidence that *Tunten*

² Gammerl, *Anders fühlen*, 138; translation by the reviewers.

in this debate perceived their gender identity as at odds with the sex assigned to them at birth' (p. 168). But do we need 'clear evidence' to seriously consider this possibility? Griffiths himself quotes a contemporary observer who 'came away with the impression that *Tunten* saw themselves as women and as victims of the oppression of women' (p. 175), giving some indication that the line between 'gender fuck' and 'transsexual or transgender' (p. 168) may not be as cleanly drawn. Third, Griffiths could have gone into greater depth in his account of the dubious alliances that many gay action groups held with paedosexual groups. He points out the 'wide support within gay liberation for the liberation of childhood sexuality [which] often coincided with a measure of tacit or explicit support for the rights of self-defined paederasts or paedophiles' (p. 207), but in light of Jan-Hendrik Friedrichs's recent work on the entanglements between homosexual and paedosexual politics, these could have been more central to Griffiths's analysis.³

All in all, Griffiths offers a comprehensive and convincing account of the gay movement of the 1970s. His critical lens allows him both to deconstruct an often mystifying decade and highlight its significance in a longer history before and beyond the 1970s. His study advances queer history through not only its overview of male homosexual politics in 1970s West Germany, but also its critical appreciation. Most importantly, his interpretation of the period as a 'thoroughly unstable blend of competing conceptions and feelings about what being gay meant and involved, alongside contrasting analyses of what liberation stood for and how this might be reached' (p. 30) represents nothing less than a queering of the legacy of gay liberation.

³ Jan-Henrik Friedrichs, "'Verbrechen Ohne Opfer?' Die "Pädophiliedebatte" der 1970er Jahre in Sozialwissenschaft und Schwulenbewegung aus macht-theoretischer Perspektive: Essay', *Jahrbuch Sexualitäten* (2021), 62–84.

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