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Dagmar Herzog. *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 361 S. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-11702-7.

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A Sexual *Sonderweg*? Pleasure and Evil in Germany

In the introduction to his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault stated that his purpose was not to arrive at the truth about sex, but rather to ask "why has sex been so widely discussed, and what has been said about it?-What were the effects of power generated by what was said? What are the links between these discourses, these effects of power, and the pleasures that were invested by them? What knowledge was formed as a result of this linkage?"[1] Starting from Foucault's analysis, Dagmar Herzog asserts that discourses on sexuality produce knowledge not only about sexuality itself, but about other subjects, including politics and history. "The value of the history of sexuality," she writes in the conclusion to *Sex after Fascism*, lies "in what it can teach us about how meaning-making happens in quite diverse political circumstances–and how it is shaped by and shaped those circumstances" (p. 261).

Herzog looks at the ways in which German speakers have linked two themes–sexual morality and the memory of Nazism and the Holocaust. She starts from an intriguing observation: whereas the moralists of the 1950s accused the Nazis of sexual licentiousness, those of the 1960s portrayed them as repressed and prudish. These discourses were not simply about sex, but also expressed each generation's feelings about the entire history of the Nazi era, and particularly about the Holocaust. Here, indeed, is a site where sex and politics, pleasure and power are linked.

In order to explore these discussions and their meaning, Herzog begins with an enlightening chapter on sexual morality in the Nazi era itself. On the question of how one would characterize the Nazis–prudish or licentious–her conclusion is ambiguous. The Nazis promoted an odd mixture of liberalism and conservatism. Official propaganda sometimes encouraged such behaviors as pre- and extra-marital sexual relations, unwed motherhood, and divorce, and sometimes warned against them. Herzog rightly attributes this inconsistency to the conflict between two systems of morality, one derived from the eugenics and sexual reform movements of the Weimar period, and the other from the Christian churches, which the government sought to appease. She might have placed more emphasis on the continued adherence of the majority of the population to Christian sexual norms–an attitude that sometimes frustrated Nazi radicals. On homosexuality, Herzog observes that the regime's repressive policies were not (contrary to the opinion of many historians) chiefly conservative; on the contrary, they were derived from the highly modern science of sexology, which had claimed that homosexual impulses were not confined to an abnormal minority, but were probably felt by most "normal" individuals as well. In short, in this as in other areas, the Nazi era was sufficiently complex to give rise to differing historical interpretations.

But of course subsequent generations of Germans were far more interested in using this history to back up their own personal and political agendas than in exploring its complexity. And behind all of these agendas lay the haunting memory of the Holocaust and the agonizing question of responsibility. Fueled by a religious revival, the conservatism of the 1950s blamed Nazism on the nation's impious rejection of religion and its turn to secularism–a trend that they alleged had been encouraged by left-wing political parties. The chief symptom of this pagan spirit had been sexual licentiousness; its chief outcome, the crimes of Nazism, including the concentration camps and the Holocaust. A return to Christian sexual values thus signaled the nation's rejection of its dark past and its return to moral virtue and political normality.

The generation of the 1960s furiously rejected its elders' views of both past and present. The student revolutionaries created a new picture of National Socialism that was based on the theories of the Frankfurt School and of the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. They portrayed a harsh and joyless regime that repressed sexuality in order

to divert its citizens' energies into cruelty, violence, and war–and ultimately into genocide. Because fascism had arisen from sexual repression–Auschwitz, some insisted, could not have happened in a sexually free and uninhibited culture–an anti-fascist politics must be based on sexual liberation. Trumpeting the slogan "the personal is political," the 1960s radicals set out to revolutionize sex as well as politics.

Though focused chiefly on the 1950s and 1960s, the book's chronological scope is longer, ranging from 1933 until the present. And its coverage is not confined to West Germany. A chapter on the GDR describes its distinctive sexual culture, which was shaped less by memories of the past than by a future-oriented socialist ideology.

Herzog's interpretation of this turbulent history is incisive. Germans' preoccupation with the sexual elements in Nazism did not encourage them to confront the history of the Holocaust. In fact, the endless discussions of sex reinforced a general tendency to avoid responsibility and to distort the past. Too much emphasis on the psychology of the perpetrators often made the victims invisible. Those who loudly denounced the crimes of the past did not always overcome anti-Semitic prejudice–indeed, some continued to express hostile attitudes toward Jews. The tendency to use the Holocaust as a framework for the discussion of sexual problems encouraged self-pity rather than historical awareness. And Herzog concludes that the attempt to link sex and politics led to a dead end. Disillusioned veterans of the student movement were forced to conclude that sexual liberation did not bring political revolution. Indeed, the feminists of the 1970s often pointed out that the new "liberated" morality was often just a trendy rationale for old-fashioned sexism.

Herzog provides an innovative perspective on the history both of sexuality and of Nazism. Her broader argument that in this as in other times and places sex was "an extraordinarily significant locus for politics.... and as such a central element in strategies of rule" (p. 8) is convincing. And this book also contributes to today's debates on how the Holocaust should be remembered and memorialized. On this subject, Herzog is right on target. As recent works such as Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* emphasize, the Holocaust functions in our own era as a giant screen upon which we project our personal and political obsessions.[2] And some of these are sexual. Indeed, some reviewers of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* attributed the book's popularity to a lustful fascination with "the pornography of violence."[3] In order to understand the history of the Holocaust and all its disturbing implications, we must identify and criticize these trivializing and distorting tendencies.

But Herzog's study also raises some interesting questions. To derive the history of sexuality in Germany from a German phenomenon–National Socialism–is to imply that the German story is somehow distinctively German, and thus different from what happened elsewhere. In effect, it is to portray the history of sexuality in modern Germany as part of a German *Sonderweg*, or "special path," which followed a course that was set first by the causes and then by the results of the National Socialist era. Herzog often admits that the story she tells is very similar to those of other Western countries, which showed many of the same patterns: conservatism in the 1950s, student rebellion in the 1960s, feminism in the 1970s. But she insists that though Germany moved "in tandem with developments throughout the Western world," there were nonetheless "dimensions of the sexual revolution that were specific to West Germany." Among these were the "distinctive force and fury" and the "heightened drama" that characterized West German debates on sexual morality (p. 141). But Herzog does not–and in the absence of comparative examples, cannot–persuade the reader that German debates on sexuality were more forceful or furious than those that took place at the same time elsewhere. Throughout the book, I was just as often struck by what Germany had in common with other countries as by German uniqueness.

Because she focuses so tightly on the effects of National Socialism, moreover, Herzog ignores or minimizes other causative factors. My favorite chapter was the one on the permissive child-rearing methods adopted by some young German parents and experimental nursery schools (*Kinderläden*) in the 1960s and early 1970s. I can easily believe that these practices expressed this generation's desire to expunge the evil heritage of National Socialist authoritarianism. But Herzog says little about some other conditions that were probably just as important: the material security and prosperity of the postwar years, the hedonistic atmosphere of the consumer society, the decline of religious and patriarchal authority, and perhaps also influences from across the Atlantic, where permissive child-rearing methods had been popular since the 1940s. All of these were Western rather than distinctively German developments.

And Herzog's indictment of Germans' attempts to reconstruct and memorialize the history of the Holocaust is

sometimes one-sided. She is right to criticize Germans' tendency to avoid, minimize, or trivialize the responsibility of Germans for the crimes of National Socialism. But compared to some other countries that were involved in the Second World War–for example, Japan, or even the United States–Germany seems to me to have made a creditable effort in recent years to remember and to draw lessons from the darker episodes of its history. Whether this effort will be carried on by a younger generation for whom the Holocaust seems almost to be ancient history remains to be seen.

Notes

[1]. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 11.

[2]. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

[3]. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); see also Michael L. Meng's review of Carolyn J. Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), published on H-German, August 25, 2005.

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