



Heike Bauer. *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017. 236 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4399-1433-5.

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Commissioned by Aidan Beatty (University of Pittsburgh)

One of the iconic images of the rise of the Third Reich is a famous photograph of books burning. Those books were taken from the library of Berlin's Institute for Sexual Science, founded in 1919 by Magnus Hirschfeld, one of the first people to articulate a discourse of homosexual rights. In *The Hirschfeld Archives*, Heike Bauer uses Hirschfeld's extensive published writings and surviving papers to trace the impact of violence on queer life and queer activism in early twentieth-century Germany.

In Bauer's account early homosexual rights discourses were shaped by the larger social violence to which queer people were subjected. Such antiqueer violence was not incidental, but endemic to the point of structuring queer existence. From the outset Bauer articulates a commitment to a fully intersectional analysis, explaining that while "the victims of [antiqueer] violence are often imagined as white," in fact such violence cannot be separated from "colonial violence, racial oppression, and the unequal contribution of power within a society that denied full citizenship on grounds of gender" (p. 2). The book is deeply invested in interpreting historical violence "from below," and with "empathy and apprehension"—that is, maintaining constant alertness to the question of who was included in the emerging community of homosexuals as potentially rights-

bearing subjects. These investments signal it as a contribution to a queer cultural studies conversation that grapples with systemic oppression, negative affect, and collective identity. Its chief contribution in this context is the richness and originality of Bauer's historical research documenting the pervasiveness and impact of physical violence on white queer people's perceptions of the world.

While the book is rooted in extensive research in both written and visual artifacts from Magnus Hirschfeld's archives (hence the title), Bauer explains that she is less interested in reconstructing Hirschfeld's experience than in mining his extensive writings on "homosexual suicide, war, racism, sexual violence, and corporal punishment" to reconstruct the many manifestations of hostility that contextualize the emergence of gay identity in Germany (p. 3). Despite this intention, the life-writing is what will linger with me. Structural violence matters because of its impact on people's lives, and it may not be possible to write the history of violence in any detail without generating a certain biographical effect. Bauer's basically chronological narrative reinforces that effect: the book moves from the founding of the Institute through its flourishing to its destruction before tracing Hirschfeld's subsequent world tour and eventual death. And as the chapters unfold, we learn something of Hirschfeld's inner life as

well as stories about his accomplishments and setbacks; and we get wonderful glimpses into the circle of people (mostly white, mostly men) who moved in and around the Institute.

The first chapter, “Sexual Rights in a World of Wrongs,” establishes the existence and significance of the larger imperialist context for the emergence of modern homosexual rights discourse. Here Bauer marshals an impressive range of theorists working on racism and colonial relations to help establish a conceptual link between Hirschfeld’s evident identification with German national power and his willingness to ignore the dominant racial system that nonetheless haunted his emerging sexual analysis. This chapter will be especially useful as a methodological model for graduate students exploring intersectional analysis. Chapter 2 looks at how violence sustained and witnessed by individual queers provided “the emotional prompts for Hirschfeld’s work” (p. 11) and contributed to an increasing sense of collective identity. This chapter includes a memorable and persuasive section that documents homosexual men’s engagement with Oscar Wilde’s suffering and death as a kind of cultural resource. Chapter 3 is interested in how Hirschfeld’s emergent concept of homosexual rights responded to the larger culture of “normal cruelty” in which child abuse and exploitation, sexual assault, and gender-based violence were everyday occurrences. Here Bauer suggests that Hirschfeld’s interest in defending homosexuality from the charge of inherent abusiveness led him to ignore or downplay violence against girls and intersex people; she offers the concept of “impeded empathy” to describe the way that identification with the harm suffered by one group can lead people to obscure or deny other forms of harm (p. 76).

The book’s final two chapters describe the Institute’s destruction by the Nazis and Hirschfeld’s exile and death. These are longer and less tightly controlled by a central organizing concept than the first three chapters—I found their analysis

less persuasive, but even more fascinating to read. Chapter 4 explores daily life at the Institute and the different ways people participated in its sociality, noting the presence of trans people and sketching out the intersection of gender with class in the daily work that maintained the building and community. It goes on to argue that the way the Nazis interacted with the Institute’s objects performed engrained homophobia. The book concludes with an account of the world tour on which Hirschfeld embarked in 1930.

Bauer’s research is deep and her presentation is striking especially for the sophistication with which she interweaves archival analysis with analysis of the archive. Her prose is clear and strong and readable; her anecdotes are memorable and she unpacks many occurrences with admirable sensitivity to the multiple forces and trends that informed them. Her project also raises useful methodological questions about how scholars mark the boundaries between history and biography, between one life and many lives, between subjective experience and group identity. The book should teach well for both advanced undergraduates and graduate students. There is a great deal to praise about *The Hirschfeld Archives*. Yet in the end I felt that the author had missed some important opportunities to evoke and explore precisely the affective relations of “empathy and apprehension” that she wants to foreground.

For a book about the effects of violence, this one moves rather quickly through its discussions of the impact and local meaning of individual violent events. Trauma is traumatic partly because it ruptures our sense of order and meaning. Bauer’s scholarly commitment to argument and interpretation therefore sometimes works against her interest in engaging with the way that violence breaks the world. For instance, the Institute of Sexual Science contained a bust of Hirschfeld. When the Nazis wrecked the Institute they broke the head off the bust, mounted it on a pole, and

paraded it through the streets before attempting to burn it in the bonfire of books—a particularly horrifying spectacle for Hirschfeld, who learned about it in a Paris cinema that showed a newsreel of the event (p. 98). Bauer writes about this experience primarily in terms of her proposition that the Nazis studiously avoided the moral contamination of physical intimacy with the relics of queerness, in this instance by means of the pole that separated their hands from the image of Hirschfeld’s head. I am not completely persuaded (the ancient political gesture of carrying someone’s head on a pike seems to me precisely to affirm one’s willingness to dabble in the blood of one’s enemies) but more to the point, I am perplexed by Bauer’s decision to focus not on Hirschfeld’s distress but on his lack of interest in her symbolic interpretation of the event. Thus she notes that Hirschfeld “wrote in his diary about his deep distress” and then claims that he removed himself “from the symbolism of the action by referring to his bust simply as a work by the sculptor Eisenstein” (p. 98). If Hirschfeld described his distress, I want to know about it in his terms; and if he wrote about his effigy in his diary by reference to its sculptor, I want to know more about Eisenstein and what that relationship meant to Hirschfeld. This passage—and several others—ultimately sidestepped the possibility of arousing an empathetic response in favor of urging us toward an analytic one.

This may be because the scholarly norms governing Bauer’s work valorize a kind of historical objectivity that prefers to explain feeling, rather than contemplating and resonating with it. But this is exactly the kind of rationalism that Bauer identifies in chapter 1 as subtending the violence of empire (p. 31), or, in chapter 3, as impeding Hirschfeld’s ability to recognize and empathize with the suffering of girls (pp. 75-77). What would happen to the text—and to historical writing more generally—if its argumentative trajectory were allowed to dissolve in favor of evoking moments of horror? What might such a strategy enable for

readers? These questions don’t quite surface in *The Hirschfeld Archives* and leave me wishing Bauer had given us more of her excellent thinking on the role of empathy in historical scholarship and writing.

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