



Javier Samper Vendrell. *The Seduction of Youth: Print Culture and Homosexual Rights in the Weimar Republic.* German and European Studies Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Illustrations. xiii + 261 pp. \$32.95, e-book, ISBN 978-1-4875-3606-0.

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The question of youth has consistently troubled gay politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as homophobic detractors have hurled accusations of abuse to undermine the gains of gay activists. Seemingly affording these accusations credence are cases of abuse involving same-sex desiring men as well as the eroticization of youth in some gay media, which, in the German case, has recently led organizations like the Gay Museum Berlin to address how this worrying dynamic is embedded in the archive [1]. The fact that parallel cases involving heterosexuals do not hold the same generalizing potential has done little to help historians of homosexuality investigate these dynamics without risking discrediting gay movements, past and present.

However, the difficulty of writing integrated histories of moral panic, homophobia, and desire has made them no less urgent. In his *The Seduction of Youth: Print Culture and Homosexual Rights in the Weimar Republic*, Javier Samper Vendrell examines the fraught relationship between homosexual activism in Weimar Germany and the question of youth. Drawing on an impressive array of sources, which center on the League for Human Rights (Bund für Menschenrecht, BfM) and its

publications but include the writings of other homosexual activists, researchers, and morality campaigners, as well as legislative debates, police records, and other cultural productions, Samper Vendrell elaborates the often-contradictory relationship between the homosexual movement, print culture, and widespread anxieties that German youth were in danger of homosexual seduction. In so doing, Samper Vendrell argues that homosexual publications were “fertile ground for homosexual *and* homophobic politics” (p. 8). Ultimately, he contends, the inability of the homosexual movement to reconcile the contradiction between respectability politics and the erotic allure of youth contributed to its demise.

This book engages with an emerging body of literature that pairs the emancipatory moment of Weimar with a focus on the underlying tensions that shaped interwar homosexual movements. Samper Vendrell takes up Jennifer Evans’s call to queer German history and complicate narratives of progress.[2] Not only have such narratives defined German history, as Samper Vendrell points out, but they also have often helped affirm the work of postwar activists and historians. Instead, this book follows scholars of Weimar sexu-

ality, like Heike Bauer, Laurie Marhoefer, and Katie Sutton, in deconstructing a strictly laudatory portrayal of male-centered homosexual movements by revealing the limitations, exclusions, and violence embedded in these movements while broadening the scope of queer history. At the same time, in his focus on Weimar activist and publisher Friedrich Radzuweit, Samper Vendrell joins with scholars like Moritz Liebknecht, whose recent book on postwar sexology, *Wissen über Sex* (2020), similarly resists constructing hagiographies of leading figures in homosexual movements.

The chapters are ordered thematically, oscillating in focus between heterosexual anxieties and homosexual activism. The first chapter engages with the attempts of German researchers to explain homosexuality through a particular focus on adolescent sexuality. Drawing on Michel Foucault, Samper Vendrell elaborates a “multiplication of discourses” that defined exchanges between experts in fields ranging from psychoanalysis to criminal justice as they sought to simultaneously protect adolescent boys from homosexual seduction and shore up heterosexuality (p. 18). These conversations were rooted in a specific historical moment, in which heterosexuality was perceived as being under threat from a rise in homosexuality. The experience of war generated a further set of anxieties about the fragility of young men’s bodies and souls, and researchers believed that youths had never been more vulnerable. Despite these overarching concerns, experts on sexuality were far from unified in their theories on the origins of homosexuality. Samper Vendrell details these conflicts and tensions using the work of researchers, including Albert Moll, William Stern, and Max Dessoir, among others, as well as of those like Magnus Hirschfeld who sought to resist the pathologization of homosexuality. It is in this study that Samper Vendrell is able to anchor the overlapping categories of “youth” and “adolescent,” revealing how these categories themselves were highly contested and historically contingent.

The next two chapters turn to Radzuweit, an “underestimated figure” in Weimar-era homosexual movements in comparison to his contemporaries and sometimes rivals, like Hirschfeld and Adolf Brand (p. 38). Unlike his contemporaries, Radzuweit ran his organization like a business, developing a strong sense of market segmentation and explicitly catering to shifting needs and desires of same-sex desiring Germans. Samper Vendrell positions this strategy in the twin histories of capitalism and liberal democracy, showing how in many ways Radzuweit was an early proponent of the power of the “pink money,” which at once garnered a relatively wide readership and group membership and set up a tension between political and commercial goals. Although Radzuweit emphasized respectability and developed “a discourse around homosexuality in which productivity predominated,” his firm belief that commercial success could only bolster the movement meant that BfM publications consistently eroticized youth to attract readers (p. 59). To explain this contradiction, Samper Vendrell conducts a careful analysis of written and visual media, focusing on *The Journal for Human Rights* and its companion publication, *The Island*, to show how seemingly salacious material could hold a range of political possibilities, from emphasizing consent in intergenerational relationships to shoring up the aesthetic supremacy of the Nordic race. Aesthetics and sexuality, Samper Vendrell concludes, cannot always be set apart, making this source base particularly rich.

As chapter 4 details, however, a diverse group of morality campaigners seized on these materials as evidence of the BfM’s dangerous potential, calling for stricter regulation. Samper Vendrell outlines a moral panic brewing in the wake of Germany’s defeat in the First World War, in which morality—particularly the moral health of youths—was deemed as important as hygiene or population growth to the nation’s regeneration. Homosexual publications were put into the new category of “trash and smut,” codified in the 1926

Law for the Protection of Youth Against Trash and Smut. Although adventure novels, romance stories, and sensationalist papers also fell under the purview of the law, its implementation undermined the visibility that the homosexual movement had gained through print media. Between 1927 and 1933, all of Radzuweit's popular publications had come under legal scrutiny, cementing the belief that youth were in need of protection from the seduction of homosexual propaganda.

The fifth chapter similarly examines the relationship between law, activism, and publishing. The 1920s and 1930s saw a series of highly publicized trials involving same-sex desiring men who targeted teenage boys, requiring some activists and commentators to separate respectable homosexuality from criminal and pathological pederasty. Although some rejected this move, Radzuweit argued that the success of the movement depended on an outspoken commitment to protecting youth and collaborating with police. However, Radzuweit's claim that the homosexual movement had the best interests of youth at heart held little sway with a wider public engrossed in lurid stories of rape and murder. The ongoing publication of images and literature that eroticized youth further undermined Radzuweit's stance, a contradiction that Samper Vendrell attributes to commercial interests conflicting with political necessity.

The final chapter reveals how two of the movement's leading organizations, Hirschfeld's Scientific-Humanitarian Committee and Radzuweit's BfM, fractured along the interrelated questions of age of consent and male prostitution. While the former organization advocated for the age of consent to be set at sixteen and saw the ongoing criminalization of male prostitution as deeply discriminatory, the latter argued for a higher age of consent and supported the criminalization of male prostitution. In so doing, the BfM embraced conservative claims that youth required protection and homosexuals should restrain themselves. The ambivalence about the limits of homo-

sexual rights entered the arguments of liberal and even leftist lawmakers, as the 1929 proposed legal reform that would decriminalize sex between consenting adult men was coupled with the harsh criminalization of "flagrant sodomy" in cases where one of the participants was under the age of twenty-one. Though these proposals were heralded by the BfM and condemned by the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, neither entered law during the crisis years between 1929 and 1933.

Although Samper Vendrell often criticizes Radzuweit's politics and strategies, calling him at times an "opportunist" and explaining how the BfM was "vulnerable to hypocrisy," the book cannot be read as a simple takedown of a problematic figure in the movement (pp. 114, 128). Instead, Samper Vendrell carefully untangles a messy historical context in which homosexual activists were forced to contend with an enduring moral panic that articulated anxieties of moral degeneration in terms of homosexual seduction. At the same time, the book's pairing of politics and desire opens up room for further inquiry into a seemingly well-researched past. Samper Vendrell convincingly argues that Radzuweit's attempt to capitalize on the allure of youth undermined his strategy of respectability. However, as Samper Vendrell points out, this contradiction was not always clear to Radzuweit, who believed that commercial success that depended on this eroticization would help the movement, raising questions about at what other points certain homosexual desires could be deemed politically useful. Additional theoretical scaffolding around the category of "youth" would have been clarifying; however, Samper Vendrell's explication of the historical contingency of the term highlighted just how difficult the idea of homosexual seduction was to contest. This minor challenge underscores the work's overall accomplishment. Not only has Samper Vendrell written a book that is potentially generative of new histories of this moment, but his dexterity in handling the difficult themes of youth, consent, and abuse in the context of homosexual

emancipation will also undoubtedly serve as a model for future studies.

Notes

[1]. Christian Füller, “Wir sind ein Täterarchiv’: Das Schwule Museum setzt Maßstäbe bei der Missbrauchsaufklärung,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesell->

[schaft/queerspiegel/wir-sind-ein-taeterarchiv-das-schwule-museum-setzt-massstaebe-bei-der-missbrauchsaufklaerung/27249426.html](https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/queerspiegel/wir-sind-ein-taeterarchiv-das-schwule-museum-setzt-massstaebe-bei-der-missbrauchsaufklaerung/27249426.html).

[2]. Jennifer Evans, “Why Queer German History?,” *German History* 34, no. 3 (September 2016): 371-84.

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