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Between Triumph and Myth: Gay Heroes and Navigating the schwule Erfolgsgeschichte

I

“Did you know that some of the most amazing people in history were gay?” That is the question immediately met by visitors to the website *www.gayheroes.com*, incidentally the first result one finds when entering the search term “gay heroes” on leading search engines.[1] The website’s mission is to communicate “that gay and lesbian people are an important part of the magnificence of the human experience” (Spears). To this end, the website lists a collection of gay heroes, including Alexander the Great, Sappho, Abraham Lincoln, Gertrude Stein, Tchaikovsky, and Laurence of Arabia.[2] While gay and lesbian historical scholarship has moved beyond parading lists of historical luminaries rightly or wrongly suspected of having exhibited same-sex desire, the impulse to remember and to celebrate remains as strong as ever. From its painstaking emergence in the 1970s, the foundational mission of gay and lesbian history has been to ‘reclaim’ those ostensibly hidden from history, to provide a voice to those who have been traditionally silenced, to challenge the overwhelming heteronormativity of popular and academic history.[3] I do not wish to denigrate this mission and do not claim to be unaffected by this approach myself. However, this understandable and necessary counter-movement against heteronormative historical scholarship has created new mythologies and indeed itself privileged certain kind of experiences at the expense of others.

In his 1972 book *Society and Homosexuality* Claus-Ferdinand Siegfried argued that one of the consequences of the social prejudice faced by homosexuals was the fostering of a sense of superiority on the part of the oppressed (24-25). By pointing to a legion of historical figures such as those already mentioned above, some homosexuals internalised the idea that “their kind” was more intelligent or more artistically-gifted than the general populace. Even those who stressed the essential “sameness” of homosexuality to support their efforts against social discrimination often exhibited a tension between the idea that homosexuality is “neither good nor bad, neither better nor worse than the heterosexual world” and the belief in a fundamental “purity, tenderness, ardency, self-sacrifice and heroism” of homosexual love (Bauer 17-18). Creating gay heroes involves generating gay ancestors: pointing to both the brute existence of same-sex desiring individuals in the past but also to their ostensibly heroic qualities (if you like, ‘quality’ as well as ‘quantity’). This “genealogical impulse” lies not just behind the parading of historical luminaries but also behind the field of lesbian and gay history, forming a “gravitational pull toward writing narratives of collective belonging” (Doan, x). As will be explored in the following, however, this gravitational pull has exhibited markedly exclusionary qualities, and continues to do so.

II

The construction of gay heroes is one manifestation of what Benno Gammerl has described as the schwule Erfolgsgeschichte, or “gay success story” (161). For Gammerl, this story frames the gay liberation movement as responsible for a radical emancipation of homosexuals, offering routes out of their shame- and fear-filled existence and facilitating confident and affirmative displays of their difference (160). As Gammerl states, there is indeed some truth in this analysis, but in exalting the 1970s we run the risk of adopting a particularly bleak perspective on homosexual life before this decade. Additionally, lionising gay liberationists can involve downplaying the role of the social, political and economic developments that provided the context in which they moved or indeed facilitated their activism. Gammerl points

to the declining cohesive power of the family and changes to patterns of consumption, work and living arrangements (160-61). In addition, it should be noted that homosexual law reform in 1969 was not an achievement of the West German gay movement, but a precondition for its subsequent emergence, as was the case for its British counterpart two years earlier (Kandora; Weeks 167). Constructions which stress the heroic agency of gay activists risk neglecting both the role of these structural factors but also disregarding the agency of homophile activists and trivialising the very different context in which they lived (not least, the continuing illegality of male homosexuality).

The *schwule Erfolgsgeschichte* is underpinned by what Elizabeth Kennedy has termed the "metanarrative of Stonewall" (73). By this she refers to the periodisation of gay and lesbian life as pre- and post-Stonewall; the June 1969 riots at the Stonewall bar in New York which have traditionally been seen as the first act of gay and lesbian resistance against repression. As Elizabeth Armstrong and Suzanna Crage have noted, the Stonewall story is better viewed as an *achievement* of gay liberation rather than as a literal account of its origins, but this has not shaken its symbolic position (725). Conceptualising Stonewall as *the* turning point in gay history affects historical scholarship that pertains to periods falling both before and after this divide. In the latter, emotional and discursive continuities can be elided. In the former, the time before 1969 can be presented merely as an uninterrupted period of repression, relegated in significance to nothing more than the antechamber of gay liberation. Recent historiography has addressed this imbalance: consider Julian Jackson's *Living in Arcadia*, which seeks to rescue "homophilia" from the "enormous condescension of posterity" (13).[4] However, even in work that seeks to re-assess the 1950s, Stonewall can still loom large. For example, Daniel Rivers attempts to move beyond a "static, post-Stonewall perspective" in his account of lesbian mothers and gay fathers from the "pre-Stonewall era" (70). Yet his article ends up reifying the status of Stonewall through repeated usages of "pre-Stonewall", "post-Stonewall", "pre-liberation" and "post-liberation". That 1969 represents a "sharp historical divide" (Rivers 64) is not something that should simply be taken for granted, but a claim in need of nuance and a claim whose own history we could usefully historicise.

The "metanarrative of Stonewall" has spatial as well as temporal characteristics, privileging the American national context over others. This is partly due to the advanced position gained by the disciplines of the history of sexuality and gay and lesbian studies in the U.S. academic system, which has facilitated an impressive body of scholarship. Even though the 1970s is the decade privileged by the Stonewall metanarrative, the historiography of gay liberation in national contexts other than the American remains remarkably underdeveloped.[5] Indeed, even events outside of the U.S. are often interpreted through the Stonewall gaze. For example, the interruption of a live radio broadcast by French gay activists in 1970 has been referred to as the "Stonewall" of French homosexuality (Jackson 183). This also applies to the West German national context, with the broadcast in 1972 of Rosa von Praunheim's film *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt* (*Not the homosexual is perverse, but the society in which he lives*) often seen as West Germany's "Stonewall moment" (Holy, "Jenseits"; Steakley 14).

III

The broadcast of Rosa von Praunheim's film on the ARD network was delayed by a year due to complaints not just from appalled conservatives but also from homosexuals who worried that the film would merely cement prevailing stereotypes about gay people. The film offered an unabashed portrayal of various aspects of gay life, taking aim at those homosexuals leading hidden lives, in thrall to conventional morality, culture and masculinity, engaging in anonymous sex and prostitution. The film ends with a short clip of a commune of naked gay men, discussing how to go about seeking political change – the concluding parole reads *Raus aus den Toiletten, rein in die Straßen!*, a variant of the famous "*out of the closets, into the streets!*" Writing about Praunheim and the young gay activists who had recently arrived on the scene, Jennifer Evans has argued that "[i]n attempting to construct a positive genealogy of gay identity, these early queer critics found themselves unable to account for the rent boys and aging queens whose image fit untidily in to the new found optics of empowerment and pride" (15).[6] As Evans notes, despite their many differences and animosities one thing that gay and homophile activists did share was their mutual "denigration of the gutter" (15). Yet alongside prostitutes and "aging queens" there was also no place in this "positive genealogy of gay identity" for these homophile activists of

the 1950s and 1960s, especially those who persisted in the 1970s and attempted to block the film's broadcast.[7]

However, there was space in this genealogy for those male homosexuals incarcerated in the concentration camps during the Third Reich, once this persecution was "rediscovered" in the early 1970s (Holy, "Rosa Winkel"; Jensen). This was made possible by the 1972 publication of Heinz Heger's *The Men with the Pink Triangle*, the first published autobiographical text by a former concentration camp prisoner incarcerated on account of his homosexuality. In the course of the decade, West German gay activists would exhibit a pronounced identification with the homosexuals persecuted by National Socialism, but in tandem with a marked *dis*identification with those homosexuals who were forced to make their lives in the conservative moral climate of the Federal Republic of the 1950s and 1960s.[8] In attempting to construct a "positive genealogy", gay activists transmuted the victimhood of the homosexuals who had endured the Third Reich into a source of collective identity in the present. Having been branded with the pink triangle and incarcerated alongside political prisoners, marked with the red triangle, these homosexuals were repositories of identity for the self-identified anti-fascist gay activists of the 1970s, seeking to integrate their activism into the New Left. They were thus compatible ancestors; homophiles of the 1950s and 1960s were not. This involved, of course, the painful irony that these were often the very same people. This collocation of identification and disidentification was perhaps most notoriously expressed by activists from the HAW (Homosexual Action Westberlin), who asserted in a 1974 article that in Berlin at the start of the 1970s the gay movement was re-established "after forty years' interruption", thereby drawing a straight line between the 1930s and the 1970s and consigning the homophile movement of the 1950s and 1960s to the historical dustbin (Ahrens et al 5).[9]

A major preoccupation of gay activists in the 1970s was with discrimination and oppression, both in the past, in the Third Reich, and in the present, most strikingly in the form of the so-called *Berufsverbot* or "ban on careers".[10] Reference to oppression and its fascist legacies was the central means in the movement's attempt to engage with the New Left circles in which it articulated itself (Griffiths). Despite this, the terminologies that we have come to associate with the gay movement are more commonly liberation, pride and hedonism. Gay liberation was not a "free-for-all", the impression given by some accounts.[11] Vocabularies such as pride and liberation were (and remain) important, but their pervasive use can elide other dynamics worthy of analysis. Consider Rainer Schulze, who inexplicably states:

> For most of the Gay Liberation movements, including the one in West Germany, the Nazi past was not much more than a 'side show' anyway. The 1970s was a decade of hedonism, sexual liberation and promiscuity; the focus was on the future, on a new gay generation, on coming out, on being gay and proud – in the words of Edmund White: "gay culture [in the 1970s] meant sexual access and abundance" and "industrial quantities of sex." (32)

Moreover, such accounts are evidence of the Americanising force of the Stonewall metanarrative; Schulze relies on a literary memoir about life in 1970s New York to illustrate a point about the gay movement in *West Germany*.[12]

IV

Gay activists' attempt to construct a "positive genealogy of gay identity" was taken forward by the emerging field of gay and lesbian history (Love 32).[13] History-making was understood as an activist mission, much more than may be the case today. Recovering a sense of history was an integral part of efforts to gain representation in the public sphere. In the founding issue of *Schwuchtel*, the gay movement's first national journal, the editorial collective bemoaned the lack of historical knowledge amongst homosexuals. Since the writing of history was overwhelmingly patriarchal, gay consciousness had been "shorn off" (*abgeschnitten*) (*Schwuchtel* 2). Similarly, the founders of the movement's first publishing house, *Verlag Rosa Winkel* (Pink Triangle Press), aimed to communicate gays' "disrupted historical consciousness" by explicitly referring to the National Socialist persecution of homosexuals through their choice of name (*Schwuchtel* 10). Possibly the first historical work pertaining to homosexual activism before the Third Reich was John Lauritsen's and David Thorstad's *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement*, published in 1974. In seeking to situate contemporary gay activism as part of a historic tradition, they expressed that 1969 "marks a rebirth, an anniversary – indeed, one might say the 100th anniversary of gay liberation" (5).

Activists-turned-historians set about creating and stabilising gay and lesbian identity, attempting to overthrow the cloak of heteronormativity, offering a voice to those denied one. As Heather Love writes, "the field's powerful utopianism, affirmation of gay identity, and hope for the future resonated with the seemingly magical power of this new movement to transmute shame into pride, secrecy into visibility, social exclusion into outsider glamour" (28). Most queer theorists would point to the problems of anachronistically reading modern and stable gay identities back into the past, but Love moves on to argue that what she has found most problematic in gay and lesbian historiography is rather its "consistently affirmative bias" (45). In her analysis of four modernist texts, she aims to resist this affirmative approach and instead adopts a methodology of "feeling backward" (as per the title of her book), focusing especially on "nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, *ressentiment*, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness" (4).[14]

While there has been a significant growth, diversification and professionalisation in the field of lesbian and gay history, this affirmative tendency in its various manifestations has proved tenacious, and for quite understandable reasons. While lesbian and gay historians usually succeed in avoiding heroic or hagiographic constructions, David Halperin and Valerie Traub note the continuing reluctance "to delve into topics that risk offering new opportunities for the denigration and demonization of homosexuality" (11). Accordingly, they (we) "tend to avoid subjects that seem to vindicate antigay prejudice or that simply do not lend themselves to the requirements of gay self-affirmation" (11). An example of the former would be how little has been written about the multiplicity of sexual liberations in the 1970s and the fact that many in the gay movement (and beyond) championed the right of children to sexual self-expression (and concomitantly, supported the emancipation of self-defining paederasts or paedophiles). Given long-standing pernicious associations between homosexuality and child abuse, it is obvious that such research constitutes dangerous territory. Neither does it make for positive press coverage, as the German Greens discovered to their cost in 2013 (*das grüne Gedächtnis*). More profound are the "requirements of gay self-affirmation". Heather Love is not the only scholar to have focused on "backward" feelings. Halperin and Traub, for example, have called for an interrogation of gay shame in the effort to escape what they refer to as the "increasingly exhausted and restrictive ethos of gay pride" (5). But the "self" in "self-affirmation" cannot be escaped. Even if we accept that analysing shame (as opposed to pride) would be productive, there remains the question of whether it is possible to "write about the historical force of shame without being flooded in shame oneself" (Halperin and Traub 13).

V

While we cannot hope to fully escape the needs of the present (and our own subjectivities), historians should still endeavour to "feel backwards". This is easier said than done, however. The central methodology traditionally involved in giving a voice to the ostensibly voiceless has been, of course, oral history. Martin Meeker has argued that gay and lesbian oral history has been characterised by interviewing older gays and lesbians "in a quest for heroes" (227). Viewed from the prism of the present, the very fact that a lesbian or gay person lived through decades past makes her or his life become "an act of bravery in itself"; accordingly, we tend to see them in a heroic light (227). In his 2010 article, Meeker problematises the mythologisation of perhaps the archetypal gay hero – Harvey Milk – by interviewing one of his (heterosexual) political contemporaries, Quentin Kopp, who presents a wheeler-dealer and finagling politician, rather than a heroic grass-roots activist. My project is not oral history-based, but in the interviews that I have conducted so far, I have been struck by how some of my narrators feel compelled to establish their activist credentials in the interview process. Matthias, active in the gay movement from the early 1970s, fended off my question of whether he had taken part in a *Selbsterfahrunggruppe*, a consciousness-raising group, with "I wasn't in need of it". When I asked whether he had been scared of suffering workplace discrimination as an openly gay teacher, Ralf foregrounded collective and personal fortitude rather than fear: "I knew that we were being brave, but I wasn't scared".[15]

Gerhard, meanwhile, told a somewhat different story. His personal experiences of the 1970s do not fit into the standard narrative of liberation, self-fulfilment and pride. Towards the end of our interview, Gerhard declared that "You cannot say that this gay movement made people happier". He clearly included himself in this conclusion, as he went on to express that the 1970s had in fact been personally a "catastrophic decade" in

which he endured long spells of loneliness and isolation. Feelings such as these were certainly discussed and acknowledged in the 1970s, but as Gerhard testifies, rarely tackled collectively. It was not intuitively clear what the movement could "do" with these feelings (unlike, for example, rage, passion or indignation, more conspicuously productive emotions). While consciousness-raising groups were widespread and offered the chance to bring individual experiences and feelings into a collective group setting, the effectiveness of these efforts was mixed, with trust between participants and the lack of resources and/or inclination for a trained clinician to facilitate discussion proving especially problematic (Specht; Hanno).

VI

It is feelings such as loneliness, isolation, despair and shame that are rarely offered up for public consumption in the context of gay and lesbian history. Of course, their enunciation can be painful. Yet they are also muted because they clash with the standard narrative of gay liberation, when the shame and isolation of the post-war period was overcome by collective action, by coming together and coming out. Nan Alamilla Boyd has characterised gay and lesbian history-making as a "political project aimed at social uplift" (110). Thus feelings that are perceived as irreconcilable with social uplift, that are not affirmative, can be downplayed or elided in the interview process (by both narrator and interviewer). Neither are other historical methodologies immune to this problem. For one, these types of feelings were less likely to be recorded in the first place. Second, they can easily escape our attention. Thirdly, they can be too much to bear. Archival research can at times be an upsetting and depressing affair. Indeed, while I grasped the import and authenticity of Gerhard's statements, I was deeply unsure over how best to respond to his sadness. Similarly, regular articles in the 1970s gay press on mental distress and teenage suicide do not make easy reading (*Wenn Sie anderen helfen* 18-19). Researching and writing about heroism, pride and liberation can be a psychologically (by no means intellectually) *easier* task. Emotional continuities, devalued in part because they clash with the Stonewall metanarrative, can also be neglected since the scholarly recognition of these continuities can induce affective responses which recapitulate the very feelings in question. In tracing texts for a "tradition of queer backwardness", Heather Love also considers the "backward feelings" – such as shame, depression, and regret – that they can "inspire in contemporary critics" (8). As she writes, "the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the present" (9).

Of course, there remains a need to celebrate, to reclaim. All too often historians remain uninterested in gay and lesbian figures or unknowingly trapped within the prism of heteronormativity; whereby an unhistoricised 'heterosexuality' is valorised, to the exclusion of other categories that organise and shape intimate life. The discipline of the history of sexuality continues to be marginalised in some quarters, especially outside of the United States. We should not unduly hasten to discard the 'success' from the 'gay success story'. Some of the changes brought about in the last half-century are dramatic indeed; arguably, the epithet 'triumph' is eminently suitable. We still need our heroes, I would argue: there is even a role for gayheroes.com, cited at the start of this article. Indeed, while heroising constructions can exaggerate the role of the individual in shaping history, agency still matters. Not just certain feelings, but certain subjects have been written out of the story. Elizabeth Kennedy writes that one of the features of the Stonewall metanarrative is to privilege a "monolithic gay and lesbian identity, most often understood as white and male" (73). She seeks to trouble this narrative by analysing the role of predominantly working-class lesbian bar culture in "laying the groundwork for the Stonewall rebellion and the gay liberation movement" (65). David Valentine, meanwhile, has argued that the category "transgender" has conferred "stability on the gender of (especially white and middle class) gay men and lesbians" (64). As a result of this "sorting out" of sex and gender, the Stonewall metanarrative insufficiently accounts for the influence of gender transgression in lesbian and gay history.[16]

On a final note, agency matters not least because of another manifestation of the *schwule Erfolgsgeschichte;* the conception that Western liberal democracy and sexual and minority rights are somehow inevitable historical bedfellows. The story of gay liberation is not about the benign tolerance and superiority of Western elites, just as the story of slavery and the slave trade must not be reduced to its abolition by supposedly enlightened British parliamentarians, as Catherine Hall has passionately reminded us (28). Welcome as some recent measures may be, we must not allow our history to be appropriated by hegemonic forces for their own ends. They are not the heroes I care to celebrate.

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1 I would like to thank Chris Waters and Christina von Hodenberg for their helpful comments, as well as Jens Dobler from the *Schwules Museum Berlin* archive.

2 The website uses ‘gay’ to refer to both men and women. While this article pertains to gay and lesbian history in a wider sense, my own research project pertains to the West German Gay Movement in the 1970s (rather than both Lesbian and Gay movements). Subsequent references to “gay” (gay activist, gay movement etc.) refer to gay men, rather than gays and lesbians.

3 As reflected in some of the titles chosen; for example *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (Duberman, Vicinus and Chauncey).

4 See also Cook/Bauer. On the German national context, Whisnant and Pretzel/ Weiß.

5 There is no English-language monograph pertaining to West German, Italian or French gay liberation. There is also no German-language academic monograph on West German gay liberation (not to deny the significance of various historical accounts in predominantly popular, autobiographical or chronicle form). Although recent scholarship aiming to ‘de-centre’ the West in terms of research on gender and sexuality is much-needed (Kulpa and Mizieliñska), we may also be able to advance our understanding of the ‘West’ by ‘de-centring’ the U.S.

6 The term “positive genealogy of gay identity” is in fact Heather Love’s (32).

7 The IHWO (International Homophile World Organisation) went to the lengths of writing to the Director of the WDR in November 1971, urging him to cancel the film’s broadcast planned for January: “A federal broadcast […] is bound to have disastrous consequences for homosexuals […] and would set us back in our hitherto existing efforts, which have also been supported by your channel.” The WDR replied that the film would not produce any prejudices against homosexuals that did not already exist (*IHWO in eigener Sache* 49).

8 This is a major focus of my doctoral thesis, due for completion in 2014 and provisionally entitled “Competing Emancipations: The West German Gay Movement in the 1970s”.

9 This also privileged the role of Berlin. In fact, the first action groups which heralded the emergence of gay liberation were founded in Bochum and Münster, in December 1970 and April 1971 respectively. The HAW was founded in late 1971 (Salmen and Eckert 28).

10 Referring to the 1972 *Radikalenerlaß* (radicals’ decree). The policy permitted the screening of current and prospective civil service employees along the lines of current or past membership of radical groups, usually communist. Were sufficient evidence of a lack of support for the constitutional order to be found, individuals could have their applications rejected or contracts terminated.

11 Towards the conclusion of an otherwise insightful article pertaining to the 1950s and 1960s, Robert Moeller cites a litany of political and sartorial choices available to gay liberationists (entering political parties or “legally sanctioned marriage-like relationships”; wearing high heels, mascara, leather, suits or military uniforms) (547). These, however, were all developments and styles of self-presentation that led to vexed (and movement-shaping) contestations in the 1970s.

12 The text in question is Edmund White’s 2009 *City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and 1970s.*

13 I use ‘genealogy’ in this article to refer to what Laura Doan terms ‘ancestral genealogy’ – searching for roots and antecedents in the past – rather than in a Foucauldian sense (Doan 58).

14 The four texts in question are Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873); Willa Cather, *Not under Forty* (1936); Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show* (1936).

15 All interview narrators have been pseudonymised.

16 See Valocchi 458. “If we write back into the narratives the gendered nature of sexual practices and how they are organized, what would the history of male homosexuality look like? What questions would open up and what political possibilities could be imagined if we put community, identity, and liberal politics aside, reaffirm our interests in the plethora of same-sex desires and the subcultures that develop around them, and examine the different kinds of subjectivities, affections, intimacies, pleasures, and affiliations associated with these queerer histories of male homosexuality?”

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