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A backlash against liberalism? What the Weimar Republic can teach us about today's politics

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Ever since 8 November 2016, when Donald Trump won the US Presidential Election, people have tried to make sense of this unexpected and – for many – shocking victory. One of the most popular explanations was that of a 'backlash' of disaffected voters – mostly from the white working class – against progressive 'identity politics' in support of the rights of disadvantaged groups and minorities. Mark Lilla, professor of Humanities at Columbia University, became an influential voice in the ensuing debate. His much-discussed article in the New York Times argued that the liberal 'obsession with diversity has encouraged white, rural, religious Americans to think of themselves as a disadvantaged group whose identity is being threatened or ignored'.[1] The exclusive concern with civil rights of Black people, equality for women or separate toilets for people who identify as transgender, Lilla concluded, drove these voters into the arms of a candidate who seemed to take their concerns seriously and respect their values.

Trump's election victory is one of several recent political phenomena that have been explained by the 'backlash' thesis – that disaffected white working-class voters are reacting against supposedly excessive liberalism. The 'Brexit' vote in the United Kingdom has also been interpreted as a rejection of a perceived out-of-touch liberal establishment and its project of building a European identity based on free movement and free trade.[2] The recent electoral successes of the far-right party, Alternative für Deutschland, have widely been explained as a protest vote against Germany's liberal policies during the refugee crisis in 2015.[3] In effect, all of these explanations argue that the pursuit of liberal values such as the support for minorities' rights, while perhaps a noble

pursuit, has been so relentless that it lost the backing of the majority and is thus threatening the existence of the liberal world order itself.

This is where the Weimar Republic comes in. The collapse of Germany's first liberal democracy and the establishing of the Nazi dictatorship are among the most intensely researched and debated topics in modern history. In their search to find an explanation for this catastrophic failure of democracy, historians have long argued that it was Germany's authoritarian traditions and lack of political modernization that doomed the young republic from the start. This *Sonderweg* (special path) thesis has attracted much criticism and recently the opposite argument has been made: to some extent at least, Weimar was too modern, too liberal, too progressive. Particularly with its famously permissive sexual politics, the republic pushed the envelope so far that an inevitable backlash followed that swept Hitler's anti-democratic movement into power.

Based on cutting-edge research, three experts in the history of Weimar's sexual politics discuss the validity of this 'backlash thesis' for German history and today's politics in this forum debate. In her book *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution Reform, Woman's Emancipation, and German Democracy, 1919–1933* (Ann Arbor, 2010), Julia Roos (Indiana University Bloomington) has argued that the decriminalization of prostitution in 1927 sparked a right-wing backlash that contributed to the destruction of Weimar democracy. Laurie Marhoefer (University of Washington), author of *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto, 2015), challenges this interpretation: she argues that the idea of a backlash against liberal sexual policies is not borne out by the sources and in fact keeps us from getting at the real reasons for Weimar's democratic collapse. Edward Ross Dickinson (University of California in Davis), author of *Sex, Freedom and Power in Imperial Germany, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 2013), weighs up both interpretations and offers a balanced commentary on the 'backlash thesis'. The discussion, in the form of three blog entries, originally took place on the Weimar Studies Network, a digital platform for historians of Weimar Germany. The authors have expanded and re-written their texts for this forum debate.[4]

With this debate, the participating scholars contribute to a better understanding not only of Weimar's demise, but also of the political upheavals of the present. Their discussion of the explanatory power of

the 'backlash thesis' can make us more aware of the question how helpful the image of a disgruntled white working class voting for anti-liberal politics really is and where it keeps us from understanding today's world.

Laurie Marhoefer

Since the Weimar Republic fell, observers of German politics have argued that sex helped to bring it down. Many historians have lately endorsed a version of this idea: a conservative backlash against the relatively open and tolerant responses to non-traditional takes on sex and gender that prevailed under the Republic helped to sink democracy. Julia Roos's *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender*, the leading history of female prostitution under the Republic, is among the most carefully researched, cogent, and persuasive iterations of the notion of backlash. And Roos is in good company.[5]

Yet did a sexual-political backlash really help to bring down Germany's first democracy? If we stop looking for backlash, what will we see, including about our own moment in history?

I am grateful to Roos and to Edward Ross Dickinson for debating this question with me. I am, in addition, indebted to Roos's excellent and important book even if I depart from some of its conclusions.

My book, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto, 2015), contains a multi-chapter argument about backlash. I will not attempt to present all of it here. (Likewise, Roos's argument is quite complex; interested readers will want to consult her book.) Rather, I will describe the basics of the debate and sketch some of the evidence.

Let me begin by defining my terms. What I call the 'backlash thesis' points to conservative frustration with Weimar's sexual libertinism and the success of Weimar-era reforms to laws on sexuality. It holds that that frustration boiled up into a strong oppositional reaction, a backlash. This averse reaction changed the political landscape. Various historians identify several ways it supposedly did this. One is by driving people to back the fascists. Others argue that backlash inspired people to embrace anti-democratic measures, helping to bring down the democratic system. Or it did both. In particular, historians have identified right-of-center alarm about homosexuality, divorce, media about sexuality, divorce, and prostitution as inciting backlash. Roos, for example, looks at a 1927 law on female prostitution that legalized the selling of

sex by adult women under certain conditions and argues that it triggered a backlash.

The backlash thesis is so well accepted that when I began work on *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, I expected that one of my main contributions would be to find even more evidence of backlash.

But that's not what I found. In the archive, I saw right away that sexual politics was important to everyone, from the far Right to the far Left. I also saw that the anti-democratic Right used sexual politics to attack the Republic. The Right claimed that democracy had made 'immorality' worse and that only dictatorship could make it better. What I did not however see was a causal mechanism that helped to run democracy into the ground. Had the Right's opposition to democracy been enough to sink the Republic, Germany would have had a dictatorship in 1919. The backlash thesis suggests that something about the sexual-political reforms of the Weimar era, such as the 1927 prostitution reform, added crucial momentum to the far Right's project.

I could not find evidence that large groups of people who had previously supported democracy and opposed fascism got to a point where they abandoned democracy and/or backed fascism because they were fed up with the relatively progressive positions on sexual-political issues that prevailed under the Republic. As Roos noted in her initial entry in this debate, Weimar politics is not only party politics and elections. But I did not see signs that key power players shifted their allegiances because of sexual politics.

After a long odyssey in search of backlash, I concluded that the politics of sex played no major role in the Republic's fall. In fact, when one looks closely at sexual politics, one sees not the doomed Weimar Republic of popular memory, lurching from crisis to crisis, but rather a functioning democratic system generating consensus, stability, and successful compromise. This dovetails with the work of a camp of revisionist scholars who have called for German democracy's health between 1918 and the Depression to be re-evaluated.[6]

It is tricky to prove that something *did not* happen. The method I adopted was to re-create my search through the archive for readers, to show them what one finds in all of the places where one would expect to find backlash. Roos and others who endorse the backlash thesis examine some of the same evidence. I depart from them in that I emphasize what actors are *not* saying and *not* doing despite their heated rhetoric.

Roos and I agree on much: our differences lie to a large part in how we gauge when and whether the contentious politics of sex fed a genuine backlash – that is, a significant move against democracy *because of* sexual politics.

For me one of the most compelling arguments against the backlash thesis lies in the behavior of the Catholic Center Party (*Deutsche Zentrumspartei*). The Center, a moderate Catholic party with a sizable following, is perhaps among the least understood major players in the story of the Weimar Republic. It is unquestionably among the most important. Often lumped in by historians with the Right (itself a diverse place), the Center was in fact at home in the political middle for most of its history and backed democracy. But in the Republic's last years the Center embraced semi-authoritarianism (under Heinrich Brüning) and cast a notorious vote in favor of the Enabling Law.

Some proponents of backlash identify the Center as having abandoned democracy in part because of despair over the Weimar Republic's sexual progressivism (of which the Center Party was at times an author: it helped the 1927 reform on prostitution pass, for example). Indeed, the Center seems a prime place to see backlash. Here is a major supporter of democracy that moved away from democracy in the 1930s. Here is, in addition, a faction with a conservative take on morality, a party that at times cooperated with the moderate left on reforms to laws on sex but abandoned the Social Democrats in the 1930s.

Although those in the Center Party cared deeply about sexual politics, and the Center undermined democracy, there is no evidence that it did the latter *because of* the former. Noting this is as much a matter of examining what the Center did not say and did not do as it is of seeing what it did and said. So, for example, when in March 1930, the League of Catholic Women, working with the Center Party, organized a mass rally in the Berlin philharmonic hall to 'rescue the Christian family', one might expect to see evidence of a backlash.[7] The rally came at a momentous time for the Center. Heinrich Brüning, head of the Center's parliamentary delegation, was in the process of agreeing to serve as Chancellor of the Republic with semi-dictatorial powers. Brüning's assumption of the Chancellorship with his party's full support was among the Center Party's most significant anti-democratic acts. One would thus expect that at the rally to rescue the Christian family, Center Party leaders would proclaim with relief that now that Brüning was

becoming Chancellor, the Christian family was saved. Brüning could roll back the progressive reforms championed by the Left, such as the legalization of female prostitution, the liberalization of restrictions on media about sexuality, the reform of the abortion law, and the move to repeal the law against sodomy. He could squash the growing consensus in favor of easier divorce.

But Center politicians did not see things this way. Their speeches at the rally, which are reprinted in the Center's organ *Germania*, did not hail Brüning's Chancellorship as a boon to their efforts to rescue the Christian family. In fact, none of them mentioned Brüning. They did talk about sexual politics. But – even at a moment when the Center was quietly abandoning democracy – there was no talk of abandoning democracy in order to save the family.

Take, for example, the speech made by Joseph Joos, a party leader. He mourned the Weimar state's failure to support marriage and family, referring to the ongoing debate on divorce. But he did not disparage democracy itself. Rather, he enjoined his audience to take the long view and to lead by example: in a democratic system, he said, Catholics could lead by example. The rest of the population would come around within a decade, and 'then once again the star of joyful family life will shine above the generations'. The crowd applauded this statement loudly.[8]

No indictment of democracy, no claim that authoritarianism would save the family, but rather a suggestion that Catholics lead by example – this looks nothing like backlash. Indeed, while Chancellor, Brüning undertook no reforms of laws on sexual politics.

A second example of the Center Party's engagement with sexual-political issues, an engagement that falls short of backlash, is a speech made about the prostitution law by a Center Party Reichstag delegate, Agnes Neuhaus, in 1930. Neuhaus called for police to do more to get female prostitutes off the streets. But this speech was not a rejection of democracy. Nor was it a rejection of the 1927 prostitution law, which sought to end female prostitution.[9]

In the early 1930s, the Center Party was frustrated by some of what federal, provincial, and city governments had done under the Republic. It was extremely wary of proposals for easier divorce. It was not happy about the vote to repeal the sodomy law. It did eventually abandon democracy, at least to a certain extent – historians still debate how deep the Center's support for authoritarianism was.[10] But, the Center did not

move from democracy to authoritarianism and deal-making with the fascists *because of* sexual politics. In fact, in the early 1930s, the Center seemed willing to live with many of the compromises it had made on sexual-political issues – see Joos's call for Catholics to lead by example.

In my book, I examine a number of other places one would expect to see signs of backlash, such as von Papen's 1932 coup in Prussia, which resulted in some revisions to the legal regime on sexual politics, but surprisingly limited ones. Under Papen, there seems to have been no widespread crackdown on female street soliciting – in 1932, only 172 women in all of Germany were convicted of prostitution-related offenses.[11] The man who ran Berlin's police under Papen, Kurt Melcher, told a newspaper he would drive male and female prostitutes from the streets, and did authorize police raids on male prostitutes.[12] But was this backlash? I don't think so: Papen hated democracy anyway, well prior to the passage of reforms like the 1927 law, and in addition his regime failed to win popular support despite its limited revisions in the realm of sexual politics, such as a move against skimpy bathing suits.

In fact, even in the ascent of the arch-conservative Papen one sees striking signs that some non-normative sexualities had become un-controversial by 1932. Take for example the conciliatory letter Melcher sent to a homosexual rights organization, in which he claimed the police 'in no way restricted the rights of same-sex orientated people'. The homosexual clubs could still hold dances, he wrote, as long as they 'do not … offend sexually normal people'.[13]

The acknowledgment of someone like Melcher that 'same-sex orientated people' had 'rights' and that the problem wasn't homosexual dances, it was rather that the homosexual dances in question were insufficiently discreet, is remarkable. His letter was an expression of what I term 'the Weimar settlement on sexual politics' – non-normative sexual and gender expressions would be tolerated so long as they remained discreet and certain unruly factors – including some working class male and female prostitutes – could be controlled.[14]

Another important place to look for backlash is Nazi Party propaganda. Many proponents of the backlash thesis argue that it helped the Nazis because they successfully portrayed themselves as the one force in German politics that could restore traditional morality. It is the case that after 1933 the Nazi regime wooed conservatives – many of whom had views on sexuality that were incompatible with Nazi ideology – by

cracking down on immorality in public. But before 1933, the NSDAP did not campaign on a promise to do this. Sexual politics was not a strong suit for the Nazis. There are several reasons for this; one is that Ernst Röhm's homosexuality was national news in 1932.

If we abandon the backlash thesis, we will have to confront other questions. Roos raises one in the initial version of her entry in this debate: if there was broad consensus on sexual-politics in Weimar, how do we make sense of the Nazi State's abrupt break with the Weimar-era status quo on issues such as female prostitution and male homosexuality?[15] I agree with Roos that once in power, the Nazi State broke with much of the Weimar-era status quo; her work on female prostitution reveals a compelling example of discontinuity. But does belief in backlash hamper us here? I fear that if one expects backlash in 1933, one is inclined to look for what is old and 'traditional' in Nazi innovations, as if the Nazis harnessed backlash by restoring a status quo from the past. What the Nazis did, however, was new, even if drew on what had transpired before 1933.

Dickinson's comments elsewhere on complex systems theory seem possibly applicable to 1933. What if we treat the politics of sex as a complex system characterized by conflict and contradiction, rather than by an underlying principle that lends coherence, or by the gradual gaining of hegemony by one side, such as in a battle between 'progressives' and 'conservatives'? What if we in addition assume that this complex system results in transformation, not a settling into coherence? A complex system generates multiple potentials, multiple directions toward which the whole thing could shift, while maintaining conflict. A shift need not be gradual or logical. Rather, as Dickinson puts it, '…the evolution of relationships among component parts [within the system] … can cause complex social systems to yield radically different but still coherent emergent behaviors, to "flip" or "jump" from one potential state to another'.[16]

One could, perhaps, apply complex systems theory to the sexual politics of the last five years in the United States, where a middle-of-the-road gay activist movement suddenly won big gains, such as same-sex marriage, only to see the extreme Right win the presidency and control both houses of the legislature. (At the same time, the US maintained an almost total ban on female sex work, a ban that looks extremely repressive in comparison to the Republic's 1927 law as well as to contemporary German law.) Christian conservatives were energized when gay marriage passed. Yet, though Trump is in bed with the radical

right-wing Christians who want to roll back gay marriage, he is not just riding a backlash. He campaigned for gay votes.[17] He successfully used the Pulse nightclub shooting to articulate a racist, xenophobic and anti-Islam pro-gay agenda that appealed to at least some people.[18]

Julia Roos

Marhoefer and I disagree in our assessments of the role Weimar-era sexual reforms, like the decriminalization of female prostitution in 1927 and the projected decriminalization of non-commercial male homosexuality, played in the demise of the republic. In my book, *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender: Prostitution Reform, Woman's Emancipation, and German Democracy, 1919–1933* (Ann Arbor, 2010), I argue that the legal rights of due process and free movement granted to female sex workers in 1927 represented a fragile political compromise, and that the right-wing backlash against this compromise constituted an important facet of the destruction of Weimar democracy. In contrast, Marhoefer contends that the general legalization of female prostitution and the projected decriminalization of male homosexuality were essentially uncontroversial among the moral and political Right, since they kept 'immorality' out of the public eye and relied on the continued exclusion of lesbian and male prostitutes. In her contribution to this debate, she puts it succinctly: 'The politics of sex played no major role in the Republic's fall. In fact, when one looks closely at sexual politics, one sees not the doomed Weimar Republic of popular memory, lurching from crisis to crisis, but rather a functioning democratic system generating consensus, stability, and successful compromise'.

Marhoefer deserves credit for advancing ambitious arguments. The fact that the parties of the Left, Center, and Right were able to hammer out a (temporary) compromise on prostitution reform and initial steps toward repealing anti-sodomy laws may indeed suggest that Weimar-era parliamentary deliberation in some ways was more viable than often assumed. Ultimately, however, Marhoefer's claims about the steadfast nature of a cross-party consensus on sexual reform and the smooth functioning of Weimar democracy seem overstated. The liberalization of prostitution law in 1927 had significant limitations (for instance, prostitution remained illegal in towns smaller than 15,000). Rather than interpreting the limitations of the 1927 anti-venereal

law as the result of a stable moral consensus among Weimar's major political players, the contradictions of the 1927 reform are indicative of the deeply contentious and fragile nature of this political compromise. Previous postwar attempts to repeal state-regulated prostitution had failed due to concerted obstruction by the police and Catholic and Protestant Churches. In 1927, socialists and liberal feminists grudgingly agreed to restrictions on the consistent legalization of female prostitution to avoid yet another legislative defeat. Soon after the 1927 reform took effect, its mobilizing impact on prostitutes' efforts at self-organization came under fire. Prominent representatives of the moral Right like Center Party politician Agnes Neuhaus demanded the reinstatement of the police's traditional powers to arrest streetwalkers. Such demands gained vocal grassroots support from Catholic and Protestant morality associations. In June 1932, the National Women's Caucus of the Center Party appealed to the Reich Minister of the Interior to recriminalize street soliciting. In July 1932, the Prussian State Council, the representation of the Prussian provinces, supported a Center Party motion to recriminalize public prostitution. In their efforts to rescind the more liberal aspects of the 1927 law, religious conservatives frequently aligned themselves with the police, among whom resistance to the abolition of state-regulated prostitution was extremely widespread. The evidence of a conservative backlash against the decriminalization of female prostitution is rich and compelling. This backlash did not play out merely at the parliamentary level. Crucially, it received important support from within the state (e.g. the police), a factor Marhoefer's analytical framework tends to neglect. Many conservatives of both religious camps were willing to tolerate the use of authoritarian state powers if this seemed to guarantee the restoration of 'moral order'. This willingness to support authoritarian measures for the sake of 'protecting morality' contributed significantly to the hollowing out of Weimar democracy. Religious conservatives' response to Franz von Papen's coup against Prussia's democratically elected Social Democratic government of July 20, 1932 (*Preußenschlag*) is one example of the ways in which the 'moral agenda' helped weaken support for democratic procedures. In the aftermath of the *Preußenschlag*, numerous commentators in Catholic and Protestant publications praised the appointment of a Federal Commissioner for Prussia, who had moved quickly to clamp down on street soliciting, nudity, and 'indecent performances'.

One need not subscribe to a narrative of the Weimar Republic's inefficacy to acknowledge the existence of profound conflicts over gender and sexuality in 1920s Germany. In fact, it is only in light of these battles that we can fully appreciate some of the positive achievements of Weimar-era gender reforms. The notion of a harmonious Weimar consensus on sexual reform fails to explain crucial aspects of the trajectory of Nazi prostitution policies. It took half a century to repeal police-controlled prostitution in Germany, and only six years to reinstall it. It is difficult to imagine how the Nazis could have accomplished this reversal so quickly without substantial support from within the state and from traditional conservatives disenchanted with the liberalizing implications of the 1927 reform.

Edward Dickinson

It is a privilege to participate in a discussion with such accomplished scholars in the field of the history of sexuality.

This exchange began with three blog contributions on the Weimar Studies Network: an exchange between Laurie Marhoefer and Julia Roos regarding what Marhoefer called the 'backlash thesis' regarding the politics of sexuality in Weimar (the idea that the Weimar Republic was sabotaged in part by controversies over the politics of sexuality), and a comment on that exchange by me. My comment here is an expanded version of that earlier contribution.

I am a great admirer of both Marhoefer's recent *Sex and the Weimar Republic* and Roos's *Weimar Through the Lens of Gender*. As an historian with a long-standing interest in the history of sexuality and gender relations, I find it particularly gratifying that both books move the history of sexuality toward the center of recently-revived debates about the Weimar Republic. Marhoefer's book denies the importance of a sexual-political 'backlash' to the collapse of the Republic, which is an important element in Roos's work; but it also discusses the contribution to the considerable political success of the Weimar Republic made by what she calls the 'Weimar settlement' or compromise regarding sexuality – which liberalized laws relating to private sexual behavior while stigmatizing and persecuting those whose public behavior was judged deviant or disturbing.

My own interpretive sympathies are more with Roos's careful delineation of the political implications of debates over sexuality (in the case of her book, prostitution). In fact one of the strengths of Roos's book in my view is that it does not advance *only* the 'backlash thesis' regarding the last years of the Republic, but examines the place of sexual politics in Weimar politics more broadly. In its early chapters, it also points out the way in which legislative initiatives in this field helped to build cooperation between diverse political groupings, and hence the greater stability of the mid-Weimar years – a point similar to Marhoefer's regarding the 'Weimar settlement'. Further, I have spent a good deal of time reading through published and archival sources produced by both moral conservatives and racist/racialist radicals in Weimar, and one simply cannot get around the fact that many of them were absolutely hysterical both about the development of popular culture and popular attitudes and about the legislative initiatives of the Left regarding a wide range of sexual and moral issues. There absolutely was a 'backlash'.

But how important was it? I find Marhoefer's careful, concrete, and detailed delineation of the relatively unimportant role of sexual politics in the decisive political turning points of the early 1930s quite convincing. In fact I have written elsewhere myself that in the crisis of the early 1930s the politics of sexuality probably was not decisive. Other matters – the economic crisis, national chauvinism and resentment, social policy – played a bigger role; and in fact one of the things that conservative religious leaders were concerned about was their own declining cultural and political influence (including particularly in matters of sexual morality). What is more, in its simplest form – people were sympathetic to the Nazis because they were terrified about the direction sexual politics was taking – the backlash thesis is clearly at least partially false, because many in the Christian conservative leadership in particular detested and feared the Nazis' own brand of (racist) materialism only a little less than they did that of the (socialist) Left. And finally, Marhoefer is absolutely right to point out that the idea that the Weimar Republic was paralyzed by internal conflict is outlandish. The Weimar period was one of extraordinary legislative and governmental creativity, in the field of sexuality and reproduction as in many other areas. In that sense, the Weimar Republic was politically very successful. Again, Roos's book actually does point this out. But it is something that bears repeating.

How do we reconcile these two very plausible but apparently contradictory perspectives? For now, I do not have a definite answer. But I can offer some ways of thinking about the problem.

First, to a limited degree these two perspectives are not *completely* contradictory. After all, one of the first premises of the backlash model is that the parties of the Weimar coalition were quite successful in pursuing significant legislative reforms in the 1920s. What was driving the (various factions of the) Right to hysteria regarding sexual politics by the late 1920s and early 1930s was not just the ongoing broad change in sexual mores but also the success of the Left in passing large parts of an extremely ambitious legislative agenda in this area. The Left was not able to impose its entire agenda, and even where it did pass legislation it had to accept some compromises. But moral conservatives accepted those compromises only very reluctantly; and particularly in the Depression many of them found that they were turning out to be even less favorable to their interests and concerns than they had thought. The key disagreement here seems to be about the 1930s, not the 1920s.

Second, I suspect that it might be more fruitful to consider the role of contention over sexuality and sexual morality in Weimar politics in broader terms than either Roos or Marhoefer can do in their very brief exchange. The simple yes/no, either/or logic of the question may militate against developing a model of causation that better does justice to the complexity of Weimar politics, culture, and society. My remarks about the distinction between the Christian conservative backlash and the radical Right backlash are an example; but we could add also the Communist backlash against the compromises the more moderate Left made in the course of the 1920s (some of which were actually accommodations to legislative initiatives from the Right). That makes three backlashes. What's more, the term 'backlash' may predispose us to limit our chronological horizon only to the early 1930s. There was a sexual-political backlash on the Right during the revolutionary and inflationary period in the early 1920s that was no less virulent or hysterical than that of the Depression years; and that earlier backlash had long-term consequences (including for sexual politics).

How can we think productively about this complex picture? First, sexuality was explicitly central to the anthropology of all the contending Weimar groups – to their understanding of what people are like, and

how people should live together. That meant that sexual politics was an integral part of the complex conflicts between multiple different and divergent ideological, cultural, and political communities in the 1920s. We need therefore to define the politics of sexuality more broadly than this question allows, and we should not expect issues of sexuality to be treated independently of 'other' issues. The scare-quotes here are meant as a reminder that people at the time did not understand, say, hyper-inflation, the Depression, the Versailles Treaty, the sorry state of Germany's military establishment in the 1920s, right-wing assassination squads, or politicized justice to be distinct and separate from questions of sexuality and sexual morality. On the Left, questions of sexuality were *also* 'about' the problem that German society and culture were still authoritarian, and still fundamentally corrupted by privilege and prejudice. On the Right they were *also* 'about' the fact that (as they saw it) Germany was rapidly becoming a heathen nation, and their own language of faith, sin, duty, authority and redemption was becoming increasingly incomprehensible to the majority of their compatriots. A particularly important example was the debate in the early 1930s over abortion. Both the Left and the Right understood this not to be merely a question of sexual morality, but a question of the fundamental nature of society, culture, and polity in their country.

Second, it was precisely the complexity of the conflicts and contestations in this area that made the stakes seem so high, and that drove them higher and higher. Those familiar with my recent book on sexual politics in the Empire will recognize this argument, and perhaps I am too eager to extend that same model to the Weimar period.[19] But I think there are similar arguments in some of the recent literature on Weimar – for example in Moritz Föllmer's discussion of the experience of diversity and contingency as 'crisis' and the yearning for its resolution.[20]

Going beyond the parameters of the exchange between Marhoefer and Roos, further, in longer term perspective the connection between sexual politics and the Nazis' obsession with race is also important. Of course, we cannot reduce race-thinking to thinking about sex; but racism and racialism are about sex and reproduction as much as they are about death, even in an ideology as death-centric as National Socialism. Issues relating to sex and reproduction – including prostitution, sterilization, 'eugenic' abortion, racial 'miscegenation', illegitimacy law, homosexuality, and (a little later) even divorce – were among the first

the Nazis tackled, between mid-1933 and mid-1935. The Nazi obsession with sex/race was an instance and product of the broader concern with the politics of sexuality – of the steadily rising salience of sex in Germans' thinking about the future of the nation. It is important to recognize, here, that the Nazis represented not so much a sexual-political backlash as a sexual-political revolution. Again, it does not seem to me that we can measure the significance of sexual politics for the fate of the Weimar Republic solely by the importance or impotence of moral conservatives. They played an enabling role; but it was the electoral success and the ruthless machinations of the Nazis – radicals on the Right – that actually killed democracy. And their obsession with sex was neither unique nor coincidental.

The Nazis, in short, played on and benefited from the conservative Christian backlash against Weimar policies and cultural developments; but they also represented an important example of the very process that backlash sought to combat – of the ramifying diversity and radicalization of positions in the debate over sexuality and sexual morality in the 1920s and 1930s.

More broadly still, finally, this kind of dynamic was not unique to Weimar, but is native to all modern societies – not least, but also not exclusively with respect to sexuality. As Hermano Vianna put it in his marvelous 1995 study of Samba and Brazilian national identity, 'movement toward homogeneity can coexist with movement toward heterogeneity. They are not necessarily opposing forces'.[21] In fact, they are necessarily complementary forces. Modern societies breed difference, contention, and therefore also an impulse toward or instinct for unity. This means that they are characterized, not by a battle between tradition and innovation, but between competing innovations. And of course very frequently those who most vehemently seek to impose (or 'restore') unity are among those who most radically critique and undermine the de facto order of their society.

There is a wonderfully clear discussion of the role of this theme in the literature on the history of sexuality in Benjamin Kahan's short essay 'What is Sexual Modernity?' in a special issue of *Modernism/Modernity* in October of 2016.[22] Kahan quotes Afsaneh Najmabadi's study of sexual politics in Iran (*Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 2005) to the effect that 'heteronormalization of eros and sex became a precondition for 'achieving modernity'' in the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. He also quotes Susan Lanser's observation in *The Sexuality of History* (2014) that modernity creates the 'emergence of the Sapphic [or other forms of sexual diversity – ERD] as an epistemic plausibility'. Again: both things, necessarily, are true.

My own view, then, would be that there was a conservative Christian backlash against Weimar policy regarding sexuality, and against cultural liberalization in Weimar. It was not very politically effective, perhaps not even very politically important. The Nazis profited from both these facts.

Notes

1 Mark Lilla, 'The End of Identity Liberalism', *The New York Times*, 20 November 2016.
2 Simon Jenkins, 'Blame the identity apostles – they led us down this path to populism', *The Guardian*, 1 December 2016.
3 Melissa Eddy, 'Alternative for Germany: Who Are They, and What Do They Want?', *The New York Times*, 25 September 2017.
4 https://wsn.hypotheses.org/
5 For a citation of other works in this camp see Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 177.
6 See for example, Tim B. Müller, 'Demokratie und Wirtschaftspolitik in der Weimarer Republik', Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 62:4 (2014) 569–601; Jochen Hung, Godela Weiss-Sussex, Geoff Wilkes (eds), Beyond Glitter and Doom. The Contingency of the Weimar Republic (Munich, 2012).
7 See Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 191–2.
8 Joseph Joos, "Unser Kampf um die deutsche Familie" *Germania: Zeitung für das deutsche Volk* 31 March, 1930 (Abendausgabe).
9 See Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 109–110.
10 See Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 183–4.
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13 Ibid.

14 For a more detailed description of the "Weimar settlement" see Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic*, 202 and following.

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