

Christopher Sweetapple (ed.)  
The Queer Intersectional in Contemporary Germany

The series »Applied Sexual Science« seeks dialogue: it has an interdisciplinary outlook and particularly aims to link theory and practice. Members of the academy and of practical projects such as counseling centers and self-help organizations get into conversation with one another at eye-level. In this way, it might be possible to shorten the often lengthy transfer processes through which practical experiences have been making their belated entrance in scientific institutions. At the same time science may thus contribute to underpin and contextualize new concepts.

The series is based on a positive understanding of sexuality. The focus here is on the question of how a self-determined and appreciative approach to sex/gender and sexuality can be promoted in society. Sexuality is regarded as being embedded in social contexts: in modern bourgeois societies it is an area of life in which gender, class, and racist relations as well as ideological preconditions intersect, and often conflictually so. Simultaneously, in this area negotiations about an open and diversity-accepting development of society take place.

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Edited by Ulrike Busch, Harald Stumpe,  
Heinz-Jürgen Voß and Konrad Weller  
Institute for Applied Sexuality Studies  
at Merseburg University of Applied Sciences

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# **The Queer Intersectional in Contemporary Germany**

**Essays on Racism, Capitalism and Sexual Politics**

With contributions by Judith Butler, Zülfukar Çetin,  
Sabine Hark, Daniel Hendrickson, Heinz-Jürgen-Voß,  
Salih Alexander Wolter and Koray Yılmaz-Günay

Translated from the German by  
Yossi Bartal, Smaran Dayal, Daniel Hendrickson  
and Christopher Sweetapple

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# 1 Introducing a German Chapter of the Queer Intersectional

*Christopher Sweetapple*

“In a world, which one would most willingly define as the blindest of worlds, the presence of people who nevertheless insist on the possibility of its change acquires supreme importance.”

*Elias Canetti, The Conscience of Words, 1976*

Near the end of one of the late Zygmunt Bauman’s final book-length essays, titled *Does the Richness of the Few Benefit Us All?* (2013), he contemplated the role of the writer in this present world of brutal disparities and looming catastrophes. Happy to concede that “most human hearts” value truthfulness and abhor hypocrisy (ibid., 91), Bauman painstakingly documents the widely-held, in fact, stubborn belief that trickle-down economics and elite capture of finite resources can and should somehow be tolerated – can be seen as rising tides lifting all society’s ships, as a bearable feature of “reality” (ibid., 92) under capitalism. A look at the balance sheet reveals a discordance between society’s words, deeds and the facts on the ground. Echoing a chorus of leftist exasperation with the unsustainable status quo, Bauman dolefully notes that “the world seems not well protected against catastrophes, but against their prophets” (ibid., 95). In this sense, Bauman sees the vocation of writers as radical truth-tellers who “build a bridge” (ibid., 91) between words, deeds and the graspable, empirical world.

To elaborate this idea, Bauman turns to an important but little-known speech by Elias Canetti on the topic of whether “there is something in which writers or people hitherto thought to be writers could be of use” (Canetti in Bauman 2013, 91–2). “For his starting point, (Canetti) picks a statement made by an unknown author on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1939: ‘It’s over. Were I a real writer, I should’ve been able to prevent the war’” (ibid., 93). In this chilling statement, Canetti observes two important virtues of this unknown writer<sup>1</sup> which he holds as exemplary for the entire vocation. These virtues imply a strong relationship between words, deeds

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1 “(!)t may have been the Berlin poet Oskar Loerke”, wrote J.P. Stern in a 1986 issue of *London Review of Books*.

and the world. First, the “hopelessness of the situation” (ibid.) doesn’t defeat the author into silence; rather, it compels acknowledgement, spoken, written. Second, the author asserts their fidelity to writers’ “vocational *responsibility* for the state of the world” (ibid., 94, italics in original). Words and deeds must be jointly mobilized toward the world, toward making a difference “between well-being and catastrophe” (ibid.). The writer thus possesses the “desire to assume responsibility for everything that can be expressed in words, and to do penance for their, the words, failure” (Canetti in Bauman, ibid.). Tasked with this tall order, Canetti’s virtuous writer remains absent (“There are no writers today”, Canetti in Bauman, ibid.) yet utterly relevant, as in the epigraph above: “In a world, which one would most willingly define as the blindest of worlds, the presence of people who nevertheless insist on the possibility of its change acquires supreme importance” (Canetti in Bauman, ibid.).

Writing as prophesy of the catastrophe – then, ongoing, to come. Writing as implement to know and transmit knowledge of the world *as it is*. Writing as urgency to insist that things could be – *must be* – otherwise. Writing as an ethical stance toward words, deeds and world. Tall order, indeed.

The essays collected in this volume, translated in 2017 and early 2018 into English, represent a modest supplement to existing English-language works which, taken together, provide a partial but forthright portrait of the burgeoning anti-racist queer left in urban Germany during the Merkel era, what I’m calling here *a German chapter of the Queer Intersectional*. “A German chapter”: the indefinite article, because this is one scene, one selection of authors, and, crucially, one national context, among many; “German”, because the writers’ texts, the politics practiced, and the lives conducted under my admittedly lofty heading do such in German, among other languages; “chapter” has here two intended resonances – both “local branch” and “portion of a book”; and with “the Queer Intersectional” – we’ll come back to that part in a moment.

Readers may have already encountered this recent development of anti-racist queer politics in western Europe, broadly, and in urban Germany, specifically, through the sophisticated works of Fatima El-Tayeb and Jin Haritaworn, both of whom have excellent monographs in English (2011 and 2015, respectively), as well as a wide selection of other published academic works since 2003<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> See also the three excellent contributions to the “Special section on women’s rights, gay rights and anti-Muslim racism in Europe” in the February 2012 issue of *European Journal of Women’s Studies*: Haritaworn’s essay “Women’s rights, gay rights and anti-Muslim racism in



Or perhaps readers have encountered the story of Judith Butler's speech at the Berlin Christopher Street Day awards ceremony in 2010, in which she castigated the organizers and award-givers for their collusion with anti-Muslim racism and announced her strident solidarity with local queer of color groups and organizations<sup>3</sup>. But outside of these entry points, access to the sharp political analyses of this scene remains limited for non-German readers<sup>4</sup>. This lack of access translates into a lack of familiarity, which, upon reflection, is doubly strange considering both Germany's proximity to the beating heart of global economic and political governance and its rich, creative traditions of political activism.

Obviously, this lack of access and familiarity is one-sided. In Germany – as throughout the world – critical leftist politics are intensely aware of the goings-on in the Anglophone portions of the USA. This is, of course, both a feature of globalization as well as an artifact of the USA's massive presence in Germany. But this is also a feature of many currents in global anti-racist and sexual freedom movements, both of which have been converging in recent years. In Berlin, Hamburg, Leipzig, Frankfurt, and other urban centers, critical leftisms routinely draw on theories and discourses about race and queerness – perhaps much more so than commensurate discourses of feminism and anti-capitalism – which originate in English-language contexts. Historiographies of the US American Civil Rights movement and subsequent movement for gay and lesbian liberation, learned in university educations and circulated in political networks, both provide contemporary activists and writers in Germany with images and strategies with which to identify and strive.

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Europe: an introduction", El-Tayeb's "Gays who cannot properly be gay': Queer Muslims in the neoliberal European city" and Jennifer Petzen's "Contesting Europe: a call for an anti-modern sexual politics". Petzen's rich record of scholarly and activist contributions to this scene also deserves special mention.

- 3 Still unparalleled in its wide scope and high-quality, the edited volume *Karriere eines konstruierten Gegensatzes: zehn Jahre 'Muslime versus Schwule'* (English: *The Career of a Constructed Opposition: 10 Years of 'Muslims versus Gays'*), edited by Koray Yılmaz-Günay and first published in 2011 (the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition arrived in 2014), remains the finest introduction to this political-cultural scene. The majority of those texts are in German, but interested readers might consult the book for its three English entries, including a short text by Petzen which depicts this important episode with Butler in Berlin in 2010 ("Silent Echoes: The Aftermath of Judith Butler's Refusal of the Civil Courage Award", p. 163–168).
- 4 English-reading publics, on the other hand, have a surfeit of readily accessible works from non-German affiliates and chapters of the Queer Intersectional and writers working to elaborate anti-capitalist, anti-racist, feminist and queer theoretical insights in their respective disciplines. This could easily be the subject of a still-unwritten bibliographic survey which would helpfully sort through this thicket of writers and works.

This is not to claim that activists in Germany operate in a mode of emulation or mimesis with their projected American counterparts. I do, however, wish to suggest that this epistemic imbalance between German-speaking and non-German-speaking publics of critical leftists does produce deleterious effects, particularly for queer anti-racist activists in Germany. On the one hand, the absence of familiarity becomes, all too easily, a failure of solidarity, or worse, an opening for hackneyed political fantasies to seep in unchallenged. And on the other hand, conservatives and the far-right in Germany (and throughout Europe) jump at the chance to paint queer anti-racist interventions in the tawdry shades of unwelcome foreignness, imported decadence and/or moral menace. This conservative trend to dismiss the contributions and perspectives of queer anti-racists is also, worryingly, manifest on the left. In what amounts to a massive project of ethnoracial gaslighting, throughout Germany a weird coalition of anti-imperialist, anti-fascist and anti-nationalist traditions of street activism and urban politics have conjointly cast queer anti-racist prerogatives variously as inauthentic, crypto-antidemocratic, or as manifest bigotry. This volume of translated essays militates against these dangers, providing readers with both first-hand accounts of queer anti-racist theorizing and, in the opportunity to grow international reading publics, a potential bridge to further solidarities in this moment of unprecedented interconnectivity and unstable conditions.

Queer and anti-racist political movements throughout Europe are not going away. In fact, they seem to be in a phase of metastasis and convergence. Political opposition to homophobia and transphobia is not only becoming co-extensive with political opposition to racism and xenophobia – a banal observation considering how entities like the EU, states or even corporations conspicuously broadcast their commitments to the rights of sexual and ethnoracial minorities. More pointedly, radical sexual politics and radical racial politics are increasingly finding common cause during this historic moment, at all scales, occupying precisely that cavity in leftist politics produced by obdurate and widening economic inequalities, persistent and ongoing racisms, and the ambivalent and volatile sociolegal inclusions of sexual and gender minorities.

In September 2017 the German federal election was held. I casually polled my friends and acquaintances here in Berlin about their voting moods. The first thing to come up was the scary voting projections for the Alternative for Germany<sup>5</sup>, the

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5 Sebastian Friedrich has written an insightful book about this far-right insurgent party, *Die AfD: Analysen – Hintergründe – Kontroversen* (2017) which remains unfortunately untranslated.

new party who were rightly predicted to take seats in the Bundestag and become the first sitting extreme right-wing party in post-WWII German history. How many people will vote for them? When pressed who they personally would vote for, always the same refrain: “There’s nobody to vote for!” For a US American observer like myself, accustomed to a two-party system, this initially strikes as an overstatement. From the outside, the choices appear seemingly wide for the left-leaning voter. From the inside, however, there’s not one party who a voter committed to queer and anti-racist politics would unconditionally support. In Berlin, the Social Democrats continue to be associated with the kind of out-of-touch development politics and mismanagement of gay former municipal mayor Wowereit and the anti-migrant and racially-incendiary statements of former district mayor Buschkowsky. The Green party is still held responsible for their part in evicting the Oranienplatz and Gerhard-Hauptmann-Schule occupation demonstrations conducted by refugee activists a few years before. The Left Party’s biggest national politician, Sarah Wagenknecht, has been appropriating populist discourse about refugees and immigration in a campaign so despised that leftist activists threw a pie in her face. Of course, people voted strategically, holding their noses. But when I stated above that there is a real cavity which queer anti-racist activists occupy, this is a clear index.

In a cunning electoral move to defang the already-mostly-toothless Social Democrats, Chancellor Merkel slightly but significantly changed her stance regarding same-sex marriage legislation months before the election, allowing her party members to vote their conscience rather than as a party block. Annual polls had demonstrated that a majority of the public supported same-sex marriage legislation, Merkel’s previous steadfastness prevented it. A vote was quickly held in June, making same-sex marriage federal policy on October 1, 2017. Mainstream LGBT organizations organized festivities throughout the country. The election campaign went forth, without same-sex marriage as a distinguishing feature of party platforms. The Alternative for Germany party preyed on their far-right voters’ ambivalent opposition to same-sex marriage in the weeks leading up to the election; this, despite the fact that that same party is co-chaired by an out lesbian married to a woman of color.

While the election and the legalization of same-sex marriage were notable background events for the queer and anti-racist activists and writers I have gotten

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ed into English. Friedrich and co-author Gabriel Kuhn published a condensed account of the AfD in English in the leftist magazine *Jacobin*, available here: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/06/germany-afd-cdu-immigrants-merkel-xenophobia-neoliberalism>

to know here in Berlin, neither event were major concerns nor prominent targets of their politics or life projects. In fact, for many people I know, 2017 was a somewhat dreadful year of backlash, backsliding, and bad faith, epitomized by a loud, disagreeable book controversy.

Three of the four authors translated here – Wolter, Çetin, Yılmaz-Günay – live in Berlin; Voß lived here for many years and now commutes here regularly from his professorship in Merseburg. This “chapter” of queer anti-racist writers is, more or less, a Berlin affiliate of a larger international network. Last summer, after the same-sex marriage celebrations and at the height of the election campaign, I conducted two semi-formal interviews with Wolter, Çetin and Voß to listen to them discuss their writings and political activism. I had befriended these authors over the course of my own ethnographic field research in Berlin years before, had interviewed three of them formally during that time, and was thus well-acquainted with their writings and politics.

Months before our summer meetings – in fact, on the same day as Donald Trump’s inauguration in January – I got to witness firsthand how the writings and characters of Çetin and Voß – and by association, the critical interventions of queer anti-racist activists and writers writ large – would be maligned throughout the year. That day, Berlin’s largest queer club called SchwuZ<sup>6</sup> hosted another of its many monthly entertainment series, this one called Polymorphia, organized by local drag performer and activist Patsy l’Amour laLove. This particular party series includes a public lecture and discussion, followed by a drag show and then dancing. The lecture, titled “Pinkwashing<sup>7</sup> Israel?!” (yes, both a question mark *and* an exclamation point), was to be delivered by Frederik Schindler, a youthful freelance journalist and Green Party activist from Frankfurt am Main. The circulated description of the lecture promised to discuss why “leftist groups”, especially in Berlin, relentlessly critique the “only Jewish state” and what their organizing against “pinkwashing” has to do with centuries-old antisemitic stereotypes.

For local queer anti-racist activists, the announcement of this edition of Polymorphia sent off red flags of concern and outrage. From the perspective of the event’s organizer, that was the point – Patsy’s public persona is crafted to be a

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6 More information about this iconic club is to be found in Çetin’s contribution to this present volume.

7 Readers unfamiliar with the term *pinkwashing* would benefit from reading Sarah Schulman’s beautifully written New York Times op-ed from 2011, “Israel and ‘Pinkwashing’”: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/23/opinion/pinkwashing-and-israels-use-of-gays-as-a-messaging-tool.html>

provocateur who flouts political correctness. But it was quickly pointed out that such a “public lecture,” at least in its description, upends a broad political more in Berlin which stipulates that public political discussions about international contexts and communities should strive to include those communities to speak for themselves. Berlin is home to the largest Israeli immigrant community in Germany, a demographically young and majority-leftist population, as well as a long-standing Palestinian community. Furthermore, the lecture was announced to be held exclusively in German – another more flippantly disregarded by the event organizers. How does an event about the Israeli and Palestinian political contexts not include Israelis or Palestinians, nor even presenters who speak Hebrew or Arabic? The event description’s characterization of local activists who organize against “pinkwashing,” many of them Israeli Jews and Palestinian exiles, as antisemitic also alarmed and offended many people, far more people, in fact, than just those activists who were simply intended. Even after my own many years of residence in Berlin, I must admit that it continues to astonish (not only) me when white Germans breathlessly accuse Jews of antisemitism. It’s creepy.

The lecture saw a packed room with a divided, boisterous, even sometimes rude crowd. Patsy moderated, striking a hard note at the beginning about the value and importance of civil but passionate listening, the irony (or hypocrisy, take your pick) apparently lost on her. For the better part of an hour, Schindler then clambered through his talk – the simultaneous English-translation of his speech near the front (a last-minute concession from the organizers), as well as audience interruptions, and the general tense mood, were all minor distractions. While one could almost admire his gumption, his polemic, such as it was, pivoted between straw-men, guilt-by-association, selective reading and outright misreading, with more than a dash of en vogue “whataboutery”, all poorly hidden behind the imprimatur of his haughty, academic style of delivery. 30 minutes into his talk<sup>8</sup>, Schindler mentioned the recent work of Çetin and Voß as evidence of how the very concept “homonationalism” is wrapped up in anti-semitic and Islamist-defensive discourses, in this case, imputing that the authors denied a statement about particular cases of homosexual refugees being threat-

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**8** Video of Schindler’s entire talk is be found here, at least for the time being: <https://vimeo.com/200790848>. While it might not be worthwhile to listen to his lecture for the non-German-speaking, the video somewhat captures the rowdy atmosphere. After the talk concludes, the video also documents the question-and-answer segment, which is intermittently in English.

ened by ISIS members as mere anti-Muslim hysteria. Needless to say, there's more to it<sup>9</sup>.

Only months later, Schindler's lecture was published in an edited volume by Patsy l'Amour laLove called *Biting Reflexes – Criticism of Queer Activism, Authoritarian Longings and Speech Bans* (2017), which collected 27 articles of more or less the same type of shabby polemic thinly disguised as academic research. Several of these authors then went on a media blitz, most notably in Germany's oldest feminist magazine *Emma*. Seeing a threat in the recent gains of anti-racist interventions into German queer politics and discourse, these authors attempt to draw a straight line from theoretical concepts like the aforementioned "pinkwashing" and "homonationalism" to more diffuse activist discourses of "intersectionality," "privilege" and "cultural appropriation," threading these ostensibly authoritarian and sectarian concepts and politics to recursive accusations of antisemitism and racism, again and again. From its dust-jacket description to the sweep of its articles and the fierce publicity campaign, the book presented an impassioned attempt to take back the concept and identity "Queer" from all its current, villainous keepers.

The book became a minor hit. It sold well and received loads of media attention, dominating national and local discussions about the state of queer activism in the year of same-sex marriage equality and the Alternative for Germany. Wolter, Çetin, Yılmaz-Günay and Voß, as well as many other anti-racist queer activists I know in this Berlin chapter, found themselves having to variously respond to the myriad half-truths and accusations which smeared their bodies of work. The debate got loud enough to catch Judith Butler's attention, who co-authored a rebuttal in *Die Zeit* with eminent German queer theorist Sabine Hark, which eloquently responded to many of the inaccuracies and defamatory accusations pedaled in the book. (A translated and updated version of this Hark and Butler text is presented at the end of this volume – more about that below.)

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9 I think what Schindler is referring to here – at this point in his talk, he's hopscotching around the mediasphere to explain to his audience how queer anti-racist activists and writers supposedly minimize the threat of Islamist extremists – can be found at the end of his section titled "Gay Kisses Are German *Leitkultur*" in Çetin's contribution to the present volume. There, Çetin quotes at length the director of MILES – LSVD Berlin. While I'm told she's a very nice person, that interview (not unlike LSVD's politics), as one can read, is a mess. The casual tone, the weird deference to hearsay in a public interview, and the very serious reality behind those flippant words – none of it adds up. Consider Çetin's measured take on this example, and then revisit Schindler's shooting-from-the-hip characterization in his speech to get a little taste of what's afoot here. I'm reminded of the recent Jordan Peterson phenomena. Correcting all this and that reanimated bullshit is such a disappointing waste of human resources.