

**James Skidmore**

Today I'm speaking with Craig Griffiths, author of *The Ambivalence of Gay Liberation: Male Homosexual Politics in 1970s West Germany*, published by Oxford University Press. Craig is a Senior Lecturer in Modern History at Manchester Metropolitan University, where he specializes in modern German history, queer history, and the history of sexuality. Craig, welcome and congratulations on being named to the shortlist.

**Craig Griffiths**

Thanks so much. Thank you.

**James Skidmore**

You're welcome. Homosexuality was decriminalized in Germany in 1969, but that by no means meant that homosexuality was accepted by the broader public. Gay liberation was in its infancy and LGBTQ Germans remained subject to discrimination for many years. For example, it wasn't until the 1990s that there was even an official and public recognition of homosexuals as victims of Nazis. What caused this time lag between decriminalization and more general societal acceptance?

**Craig Griffiths**

It's a really interesting question and it's a difficult theme to judge, when social attitudes began to change and to what extent they changed. So if we take opinion polls at first glance – opinion polls can't capture everything about public opinion, but they do give us useful insights – and according to an opinion poll that was taken in 1968, a clear majority of West Germans opposed a change in the law. A change in the law that, as you say, happened in 1969. So already at that time there was really limited public support, actually, for what became known as gay rights. And even those people who did support a change in the law, according to those opinion polls, [for] some of them that was partly on the basis of what we could call a sickness model. The idea that gays and lesbians, or here in particular gay men, were perhaps not best seen as subjects for police, but instead subjects for the doctor. So when queer people actually begin to agitate and to defend not just their right to legal equality, but their right to social acceptance, that is a further challenge which takes years to win acceptance. And it's a long struggle. And I think one of the ways into this kind of conundrum is to realize that legal liberalism and gay liberation were linked, but they're not one and the same thing. So the rise of legal liberalism was absolutely crucial in allowing a gay movement, gay liberation, to emerge. And actually Pierre Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, sums this up really nicely and he is cited by West German parliamentarians when the legal change is going through: the government has no business in the bedrooms of the nation. It's a very powerful idea. And that idea won majority support, but that's an important context for gay liberation. But gay liberation was also actually a reaction against that restriction of sexuality to the private sphere alone. It was a demand, it was a challenge for a place in public, for access to the public sphere. And that was much more controversial than actually just the law itself and took much longer to achieve. And as you pointed out in your question, the role of the Nazi past was crucial in that. It was a mechanism, actually, to gain traction in the public sphere in the 1970s present [as] gay men to say that, look, we're being persecuted in the present just as we were persecuted in the Third Reich.

**James Skidmore**

Yeah. And so that legal liberalism allowed for a whole number of social changes, of course, in the 60s and 70s, and I guess [that] gay liberation was part of that. Your point is very well taken. [Not] just that

the state should get out of the bedrooms, but that gay people should be allowed to be out themselves, right? To be out and identify as who they are.

**Craig Griffiths**

Yeah.

**James Skidmore**

In your book, you unpack the history of homosexual politics in West Germany in the aftermath of decriminalization. And what I think many readers will find striking is that you explore that history through this lens of ambivalence, in particular the ambivalence within the gay liberation group or the movement itself. And of course, I guess our first reaction is we think that a group fighting for its rights will be unified in that fight. But that wasn't necessarily the case here, was it?

**Craig Griffiths**

No, there's a lot of division within the movement, division in between different interconnected movements as well; I'm thinking here, for example, of the gay male movement and the lesbian movement, which are kind of really two separate movements in the context of the 70s. But I think this question of division is a really important one. I conceptualize that also on a personal, kind of internal psychological level, which is exactly what ambivalence aims to get at. This idea that, yes, there's division between different groups, but I don't think we can neatly divide gay liberation into a more radical group over here [and] a more conservative group over here, [or] let's say those who only want to be different versus those who only want normalization and integration. And often queer history has been told in that way, kind of a story of radicals versus integrationists or left wings versus conservatives. But I conceptualize those divisions actually as happening on an internal level too, in amongst every one of us, right? So looking at ambivalence means that I take shame as seriously as I take pride. I take the pleasures of conformism, of wanting to fit in, as seriously as I take the injunction to be different.

So I don't see those just playing out between different activists or between different wings of the movement, but actually playing out within each person themselves, I guess. So ambivalence operates on this social level, but on this individual psychological level as well. For example, there's really furious kind of splits within homosexual politics. There was [a mostly] older generation of same-sex desiring men known as homophiles. And they called themselves homophiles to avoid that word homosexual, right? [To] avoid the thing that was seen as giving them a bad name or the cause of homophobia; their movement was called the homophile movement [and it] existed in the 50s and the 60s. And some of those activists continued after the law was changed; versus a generally younger generation of those who called themselves gay, schwul, in German. And yes, of course there were differences of strategy and ideology there. On the one hand, relying on kind of softly-spoken letters to parliamentarians or doctors or scientists versus, on the other hand, perhaps marching in the streets or taking part in direct action. But for me, there's other things going on as well. So, when you have gay activists really furiously denigrating and attacking the so-called homophiles, they are also, I think, attacking a part of themselves. They are trying to get rid [of] an aspect of their own approach and their own feelings. And attacking homophiles was a way to erase their shame. Well, that's how I conceptualize this. So I am interested in these divisions between different activists and different groups, but also interested in each individual activist as well.

**James Skidmore**

That reminds me of—you recount this story after the decriminalization, so in 1971 I think it was, where the ARD, the German public broadcaster, showed Rosa von Praunheim's film "Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt." Right? It's not the homosexual that is perverse, but the society in which he lives; I think that's how you translate the title. Maybe there's an official translation. Anyway, so you recount the whole controversy of that film being shown on ARD, but then you recount this letter from a homophile to the ARD decrying that the ARD had shown the film. He thought it showed something like the scum of the earth or the scum of something, he calls it. And that was very surprising, because you think, well, he's part of the gay liberation movement, obviously. He's a homophile, that older generation, maybe; was educated in this whole situation in the 50s and early 60s, but he's then reacting against the Rosa von Praunheim, which may be a younger kind of generation – he would have been not yet 30 by that time, and [he] was kind of this new, more out, more in your face kind of approach to advertising the movement or advocating for the movement. And that kind of thing really surprised me. The animosity struck me as more than I expected, I guess.

### **Craig Griffiths**

Well, me too, to be honest. I knew this film was controversial; I mean, because it's discussed in the media, mainstream media, in the broadsheets and the tabloids. Initially it's not broadcast right? There's a vote in the ARD and they decide not to broadcast it. And then it is the belatedly broadcast, but not in Bavaria. So the Bavarian broadcaster pulls out. But the controversy within the queer community for this film is really interesting for the reasons that you say. And one might expect perhaps abusive letters to have been sent, let's say, by heterosexual letter writers watching this film. But if you go into the archives in Cologne of the WDR, of the regional member of the ARD Consortium, many of these letters are written by those who call themselves homophile, for example, or they use other terms to refer to their desire, their sexuality. And [the letters] are so critical, so deeply critical of this film using very loaded language sometimes, such as, I think, the scum of humanity represented on screen. That letter writer was referring to those who, for example, wore drag or those who wore leather; those whose homosexuality was in one way or another more visible than his own.

### **James Skidmore**

The homophile so would take a more conformist approach to being out, if I can put it that way. But the ambivalence that you identify as central to the gay liberation movement; you're not necessarily saying it's negative, are you? Could you go into that a little bit?

### **Craig Griffiths**

Sure. So no, I don't think it's something negative. I would also say that I guess I don't see it as something innately positive either. I'm really interested in this as this feeling state or this concept of ambivalence. And if we trace that back to Eugen Bleuler, the psychoanalyst who coined the term, he said two things. He associated it with schizophrenia, so the idea not just [of] being in two minds, but of having [a] split personality; and this is of course painful. He also associated it in a more universal fashion. He recognized that all of us are subject to its force, this conflicting attachment simultaneously to conflicting ideas, feelings, and attitudes. So I guess, most famously, that between love and hate. I think all of us know this in our own lives; our focus more on pride and shame, normal [versus] different, hope [versus] fear. So I do recognize that this ambivalence, which can never fully be resolved, can be painful, it can be difficult, it can be destabilizing. But I do think it's productive. And I think it gives us a window into thinking through the dynamism and the vitality, actually, of gay liberation in the 1970s. Precisely because I don't think it was driven forward only by, let's say, universal pride or universal utopian longings for a hopeful future, right? I think it's much more complex than that. And recognizing

that ambivalence doesn't detract from that, it doesn't interfere with that. But I think it's a more accurate or a truer representation.

And not just about queer history. I think ambivalence is kind of a universal emotion or a feeling state. Although, Deborah Gould is one of the scholars who has written on this [and] she points out that although we are all exposed to ambivalence, certain groups, marginalized groups, might be especially prone to the pushes and pulls of ambivalence. She mentions queer people, she mentions people of colour, right? That is to say, we're exposed to ambivalence. The extent to which we are exposed to ambivalence is dependent on our social situation. Do you furiously want to be part of society or do you reject that society in part because it has already rejected you? This, I think, informs the dynamics that are going on in the 70s. But I don't think it's just about gay liberation and just about the 70s. I think this could be applied in other contexts and it helps us, hopefully, to write richer, more open ended histories as well. Hopefully it can be used to embrace uncertainty as well.

### **James Skidmore**

Yeah, less conclusive history and more raising the questions and making sure the people are aware of these contradictions or tensions within groups, between groups and the larger society, and within persons themselves, I guess, within the individuals.

### **Craig Griffiths**

Yeah. Sorry to interrupt, but it's absolutely the larger society as well. I've not mentioned that so much, but there's the ambivalence of a political culture here as well. So the law that we've mentioned a few times in 1969, paragraph 175, it was further reformed in 1973. And not a word of this Nazi law or the Nazi version of this law first introduced in 1935 – not one word of that law was changed until 1969, which is kind of astonishing. And it has therefore been seen because there have been these, let's say, success stories written about West Germany that kind of consciously or unconsciously treat the Federal Republic as a success story of democratization and liberalization. And within that, 1969, the reform of the sodomy law, paragraph 175, can be seen as just one further example of how West Germany successfully shed off its Nazi past. And we can approach it in that fashion. There is some utility in doing so. But I think if we kind of embrace ambivalence, we see that there were clear limits to liberalization in West Germany. So, yes, the law was changed, but a gay teacher, for example, could be sacked. And he was told by the court, which upheld his dismissal, that, yes, the law was changed, but he had no right to challenge Germany's unwritten laws. Unwritten laws of honour, convention, decency. And those unwritten laws, you know, they're stubborn. They take much longer to tackle. So with ambivalence, I'm also seeking to tell a history or tell a story about West German political culture as well, not just the individual – although each individual is of course important within that.

### **James Skidmore**

Yeah, the unwritten law is basically: how much will society in general tolerate? And of course, that changes as society [and] generations, change, as those judges who were probably of a certain generation retire and other judges come in of a newer generation and society becomes more accepting of ideas that previously they hadn't been accepting of. That's very interesting. How did you come upon the idea of focusing on ambivalence?

### **Craig Griffiths**

I wish I could answer that in a straightforward way. [laughing]

### **James Skidmore**

There's an ambivalent answer coming. [laughing]

### **Craig Griffiths**

The book is partially based on my PhD thesis. And in that thesis, which I think is available somewhere in the library, ambivalence is not a word that comes up. So, I think, I did try to tackle the complexity of West German homosexual politics, but I hadn't yet arrived at this analytic prism of ambivalence. So I'm not sure entirely when [I came upon it]. Certainly the work of Deborah Gould has been really important for me here. Her book is called *Moving Politics*; it's about the AIDS activist movement in the United States. But many other scholars are looking at ambivalence now. Kyle Frackman, for example, in the East German context is looking at or using ambivalence to think about East German queer history. And I've read into the psychoanalytic literature about ambivalence as well. So I guess for me, it encapsulated some trends or themes that I think I was dimly aware of, but it kind of was able to bring those more to the forefront of what I'm doing.

I guess the other thing I would say on this issue – I mean, I could talk about ambivalence all day long – is that we are on a, I guess, a path of development. But that path is never linear, right? Hard-won rights can be taken away. And one of the things I'm trying to do with ambivalence is, yes, avoid success stories of West Germany; but also avoid a success story, a teleological story of queer history in which there's a kind of universal, gradual shift away from, let's say, the shame, isolation, terror of the past through to the openness and the vibrancy, the queer visibility of the present. Because I think the history is much shakier and messier than that and also more interesting. So yeah. That's not discounting that steps forward have been taken. We shouldn't lose sight of those. But also to problematize the idea that, for example, things like gay marriage, important as they are, are sometimes taken as kind of neatly as barometers of success. And I guess with ambivalence we can kind of interfere with that, interrupt that a little bit as well.

### **James Skidmore**

Yeah. I guess to borrow from another branch of history: there is no end to history – even though Fukuyama thought there was. The story keeps emerging and evolving. And, yeah, there can be steps backwards or sideways or what have you. Yeah, I think that's true. I think in a lot of scholarship we see a moving away from the notion of progress generally. It's hard not to because it's kind of ingrained in some ways that there's a sense that society is always evolving. There's evolution; even that Darwinian thinking is always evolving in one direction, so to speak. Yeah, things like this, like ambivalence, the notion of ambivalence and the work you've done here complicate that. In a good way. Definitely in a good way. I was also intrigued in reading the book – you have a lot of information there. You bring in sources from every which area. There's correspondence and pamphlets and oral histories and travel guides, magazines, legal documents. I could go on and on. I know historians love sources; it's part of their thing and that's great. [I'm] just curious about: how do you decide how much information [you put in]? Were you trying to get everything onto the table, or were you trying to be very kind of universal in the approach here?

### **Craig Griffiths**

I would say that kind of universal [approach]. But I was seeking to attempt to tell a more holistic story, a more holistic history, even if we can never perhaps tell as holistic a story as we would like. And I think the nature of the source material speaks to how, I guess, the direction of my project changed a bit over time. So initially I planned what became the book really as a social movement history, the history of the gay movement. And over time, it became more of a cultural history of homosexual politics; so ways of

thinking, ways of feeling, ways of talking about homosexuality. And to do that, we have to use a broader source space. Absolutely we need to look at gay magazines and we need to look at activists' paraphernalia, for example placards that were used on demonstrations or letters between activists. These are all very important. But to tell a wider story, we have to talk about how the mainstream media thematized homosexuality, we have to look at film and television documentaries – you mentioned Praunheim's film earlier: *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society In Which He Lives*. I was able, for example, to tap into the audience letters sent about that film and sent about other documentaries as well. The aim being so that we're able to bring more actors into the story, not just those who called themselves activists – who were very important, but were a minority. That is to say, many other people were involved in this history, for this exercise of homosexual politics, right? Certainly not just those who call themselves gay activists; and indeed, not just those who call themselves gay men either. So for that reason, I've tried to bring in more sources alongside the sources which I kind of began with, including oral histories, in that case.

### **James Skidmore**

Well, it makes for a very rich history, and it allows for more ambivalence because there's just more information to take in, I guess. I think that's all good. It also struck me that it allows your book to be also, in a way, a history not just of the, how does the title put it, homosexual politics in the 70s, but also just a history of West Germany at that time. Through a particular lens, but it's a history of West Germany. And [when] you read the controversies and you read about the oral histories, especially where people are speaking about their lives and situations, [if] you know anything about West Germany in the 70s, you see how it fits into the larger picture of the country and kind of fleshes out that picture [and] gives it more colour. I think that's brilliant.

### **Craig Griffiths**

Thank you very much. I mean, what I tried to do for example, [as] I mentioned earlier, I look at this tension or this axis of ambivalence: hope and fear. And sure, there's the specificities there about the change of paragraph 175, homosexual law reform. But also going on there is the oil price shock in 1973, the RAF and left-wing terrorism and the German autumn of 1977. And we can kind of trace these undulations of hope and fear – yes, as they affected gay men, for example, but of course, exactly as you say [also] in a much broader way, a West German history of that decade. That was the backdrop to homosexual politics.

### **James Skidmore**

You know, books answer questions or attempt to answer questions, but they also raise questions. So what questions does your book raise?

### **Craig Griffiths**

I think, perhaps picking up on something we've talked a little about already, this relationship between social movements and change. So we've talked a bit about the timeline, right? And how some things can be gradual, some things can go backwards, perhaps, or sideways. And it's a thorny question. What is the relationship then between the social movement, conceived in a narrow sense, and a wider project of social and cultural change? And I tried to supply some answers in the book, but I certainly haven't provided definitive answers. For example, I've written a history of gay liberation, but to what extent can we apply an analytic of ambivalence to think through other social movements? Let's say the environmental movement? Let's say the peace movement? And going beyond that, how can we write more integrated histories? So I mentioned earlier that in the case of the 1970s, we're really dealing

with two separate movements: a gay male movement and a lesbian movement. And for that reason, often the histories have been written separately. And my book is in that mold. But there are attempts to write more integrated histories, which I would like to do in the future. So Christopher Ewing is a historian who has done that insofar as really trying to bring gay male history, trans history, lesbian history together – and then East and West as well. My book is about West Germany. There's a recent book by Samuel Huneke, who was written on East and West Germany together. So gay men between democracy and dictatorship; in other words, both sides of the Iron Curtain.

So in terms of the questions that my book throws up is – hopefully some of the questions for the reader, but also for me, myself – how can we embed this in a more integrated fashion? And that's something I'm seeking to do in the future. As well as this thorny question, as I've said: the contribution of social movements to social change. It is profound. I was very much attracted to write the history of the social movement, especially an understudied social movement. And it was important, whether we're talking about the gay movement or any other number of social movements, the feminist movement, the peace movement, the anti-nuclear movement. But they cannot be conceived of in a singular fashion. In other words, I'm trying to reach a broader understanding of what makes an activist, I suppose.

**James Skidmore**

Yeah. What makes an activist. Or what keeps an activist going, right? The sense of how do you keep going in the face of what seems to be the odds being against you.

**Craig Griffiths**

Yeah, absolutely.

**James Skidmore**

Since we're on the subject of books, a final question. What have you read lately that you'd like to tell others about?

**Craig Griffiths**

I'm reading a fantastic book right now by Kit Heyam, "Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender." It came out earlier this year, and I'm about two thirds of the way through it. And Kit tells an incredibly rich but an accessible account of how we can tell more gender-expansive histories that are alive to the question of trans possibility, but not in a kind of zero-sum way – because sometimes there have been conflicts. If we're looking at certain figures from the past, is this for example a gay man or trans woman? But Kit shows this needn't be a zero-sum game. We can tell more open-ended histories that are alive to gender transgression, that are alive to trans possibility, but in a very accessible way. So I'm really looking forward to finishing this book and to using it with my students. [It's] not specific to the German context. There's a really interesting chapter about German civilians who were interned in Britain in the First World War and some of the crossdressing and the drag that was used in camps for theatrical productions, and what this tells us about trans possibility, what this tells us about prison life. But it's broader than that. It's a transnational history, it's a global history. I really recommend it. So it's called "Before We Were Trans" by Kit Heyam.

**James Skidmore**

All right. Well, thank you for that and thanks for speaking to me. So we've listening to Craig Griffiths, and his book again is entitled *The Ambivalence of Gay Liberation: Male Homosexual Politics in 1970s West Germany*. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me today, Craig.

**Craig Griffiths**

Thanks very much, Skid. Thank you.