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**Racism and the Making of Gay Rights:
A Sexologist, His Student, and the
Empire of Queer Love.**

**By Laurie Marhoefer. Toronto:
University of Toronto Press, 2022.
Pp. 334. ISBN: 9781487523978.**

REVIEWED BY

Oliver Jung

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Oliver Jung is finishing his Master's in Global History at the Freie Universität Berlin. Oliver is fascinated by early twentieth-century Eastern European history, queer history, and histories of the body—in particular, the myriad ways in which bodies were read to gain a grip on increasingly mobile mass populations as part of concurrent anxieties of the modern metropolis as a site of civilizational decay, decadence, sexual inversion, and political radicalism.

Since the 1970s, Magnus Hirschfeld’s legacy has steadily risen and has become somewhat mainstream over the past two decades, even outside the Germanophone world. The Jewish-German sexologist is remembered for his major scientific contributions to the field, which he spearheaded mostly in his role as director of the Berlin-based *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*, and his lifelong public commitment to homosexual emancipation.¹ Considered the embodiment of the brief but explosive window of possibility Weimar Germany presented to those who lived and loved outside the heterosexual norm, Hirschfeld is often held up as an unsung hero by those looking towards the past to understand their present-day reality. In this monograph, Laurie Marhoefer sets out to critically reevaluate and complicate this legacy in an attempt to cast light on *all* of the intellectual movements and cultural notions Hirschfeld drew upon to craft his model of homosexuality, including those less palatable to modern-day audiences (such as racist civilizational discourse and eugenics)—in doing so, Marhoefer offers a fresh and much-needed perspective on this historical actor, who has taken on almost larger-than-life proportions in both the public imagination and academic writing.²

A central assumption of Marhoefer’s book is that Hirschfeld’s model of homosexuality—namely, homosexuality as a non-pathological, but a squarely biological phenomenon, in a way similar to how he saw race—was perhaps the most influential model of homosexuality and single-handedly created the framework in which many later queer activists operated (though, crucially, not all). Though this seems plausible enough, Marhoefer never explicitly points the reader to the subsequent history of this model or explains why it was Hirschfeld in particular who invented “the homosexual” and not any of the other activists, writers, and academics working on homosexual emancipation at the time.³ This is precisely what I aim to do with this book review: I will analyze the reasons behind this particular model’s salience and longevity, heeding the historian Samuel Moyn’s call to consider “why some ideas have conquered the globe” while “others have remained stranded without a passport.”⁴ In doing so, I will expand on Marhoefer’s work by

1 Although Hirschfeld researched transness in his ethnographic work, the bulk of his work regarded male homosexuals, which is why I refer to his model as one of homosexual emancipation. When speaking of later activism, I use the broader umbrella term “queer” out of convenience, cognizant of the anachronism.

2 A couple of relatively recent titles on Hirschfeld include: Ralf Dose, *Magnus Hirschfeld and the Origins of the Gay Liberation Movement*, trans. Edward H. Willis (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014); Manfred Herzer, *Magnus Hirschfeld und seine Zeit* (Munich: De Gruyter, 2017). As one can tell by the title of these, Marhoefer’s book is rather unique in its dialing in on race as central to Hirschfeld’s thinking and his model of homosexuality.

3 Laurie Marhoefer, *Racism and the Making of Gay Rights: A Sexologist, His Student, and the Empire of Queer Love* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 89.

4 Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, “What is Global Intellectual History? If It Should Exist At All?,” *Imperial & Global Forum*, published February 23, 2015, <http://imperialglobalexeter>.

connecting it to the pertinent temporal/civilizational discourse in Weimar Germany.

Following Hirschfeld and his partner, Li Shiu Tong, on their 1931 trip around the world, Marhoefer expertly and compellingly weaves together biographical details, correspondence with other activists, and Hirschfeld’s writing to paint a picture of his life, his travels, and his political views on everything ranging from race (chapters five to eight), imperialism (chapters two and four), and eugenics (chapter nine) to, crucially, his model of homosexuality (chapter one). In opposition to the dominant turn-of-the-century image of homosexuality as a disease, Hirschfeld defined it as a non-pathological, biologically innate trait that showed up in a certain percentage of human beings regardless of time and place—homosexuality was a stable, universal category, not somehow constructed, nor based on environmental factors.⁵ It was Hirschfeld’s universalist-biological model that made it possible to think of homosexuals as a class or a “sexual minority” that functioned very similarly to the other omnipresent, supposed biological marker of identity: race.

Marhoefer’s main thrust is this: despite Hirschfeld’s avowed anti-imperialism, a certain level of racism is baked into his theory. The principle that homosexuality was universal, despite racial differences—which reveals Hirschfeld’s belief in the true, biological significance of race—lay at the very core of his doctrine.⁶ Additionally, the analogy of homosexuality as a “sexual minority”—an analogy which was both explicitly copied from discourses surrounding “racial minorities” and constructed as its antithesis—precluded an intersectional approach to identity and assumed whiteness in a way that still echoes through into today’s world.⁷ Precisely because Marhoefer posits that it was Hirschfeld’s model (with all of its imperfections) that determined the shape of later conceptualizations of homosexuality, it is imperative to think about the potential reasons behind the long-lasting impact of said model. There were other models out there—just in Berlin alone, younger sexologists at the Institute hoped to deemphasize biology and the centrality of scientists within their vision of queer emancipation, while “masculinists,” drawing upon quasi-spiritual language of heroism and male leadership, positioned themselves as the antithesis to Hirschfeld’s democratic cosmopolitanism.⁸ Why then was it precisely Hirschfeld’s model that survived?

[com/2015/02/23/what-is-global-intellectual-history-if-it-should-exist-at-all](https://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/2015/02/23/what-is-global-intellectual-history-if-it-should-exist-at-all); Marhoefer, *Racism*, 196.

5 Marhoefer, *Racism*, 35.

6 Marhoefer, *Racism*, 89.

7 Marhoefer, *Racism*, 86.

8 Marhoefer, *Racism*, 84; Peter Morgan, “Coming out in Weimar: Crisis and homosexuality in

An obvious part of the puzzle is that Hirschfeld's model was one based upon middle-class values and sexual discreetness.⁹ Marhoefer's chapter on Hirschfeld's view on eugenics was incredibly thought-provoking in that it made me wonder whether there was perhaps a less obvious element to the longevity of his model: the role eugenics played in constructing an air of respectability, and indeed, utility around homosexuality. Both a Darwinist and supporter of (mostly) voluntary sterilization, Hirschfeld believed that there was some sort of evolutionary logic to the existence of homosexuality; since homosexuals were less likely to procreate, he posited that they were born into families with undesirable genes, functioning as a natural stop to the transmission of flawed characteristics unto the next generation.¹⁰ This logic turned homosexuals into productive cogs in the Darwinist machine, a move that cemented Hirschfeld's claim of homosexual respectability.

His views on eugenics betrayed a more general view of nature as a space of internal order, a harmonious system where every creature has a predetermined role. For Hirschfeld, homosexuality was a phenomenon willed into being by nature. Suppressing it through policy would be unnatural, unscientific, and down-right foolish: homosexual emancipation was, in Hirschfeld's own words, no more and certainly no less than "the battle of modern science against superstition and ignorance of nature."¹¹ This view of nature reflected a sentiment that would have appealed to a large swath of reformers active at the time: the idea that humankind had lost its way in its long march towards progress and civilization and needed only to turn to nature, a source of great wisdom and teaching, to find its path forwards.

In this way, Hirschfeld implicitly placed his program of homosexual emancipation within the broader Primitivist framework influential across the political spectrum in Weimar Germany and abroad, ranging from adolescent hiking groups (*Wandervögel*) to Indophile, vegetarian "life reformers" (*Lebensreform*) to nationalist "back-to-the-land" groups striving for racial purity (the *Völkische Bewegung*). This seems to be another clue that may explain why Hirschfeld's model initially came into the limelight and "conquered the globe." In other ways, however, he departed from the Primitivist ideal of fleeing modernity in search of nature, a space of purity and salvation. Where Primitivists hailed nature as the space of the unknowable, the emotional, and the beautifully chaotic, to Hirschfeld, nature represented a locus of superior, rational logic. Nature presented humanity with a truth that was hiding in plain sight—scientists, the very product of modernity, need

the Weimar Republic," *Thesis Eleven* 111 (2012): 48-65.

9 Marhoefer, *Racism*, 39.

10 Marhoefer, *Racism*, 132, 141.

11 Marhoefer, *Racism*, 85, 122.

only to look and they would find the natural, the scientific, and, thus, the just way forward.

All in all, Marhoefer's book proves to be an extremely worthwhile read; in particular their nuanced and analytical case regarding the centrality of race within Hirschfeld's model of homosexuality is a much-needed addition to existing historiography on Hirschfeld's life and work. While Marhoefer does not explicitly discuss potential reasons behind the longevity of Hirschfeld's model, their fascinating work on "queer eugenics" offer new avenues of thinking about why it could be that it was precisely Hirschfeld's model that shaped the contours of much of today's thinking on homosexuality.