SEVENTEENTH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM OF THE FRIENDS OF THE GHI
AND AWARD OF THE FRITZ STERN DISSERTATION PRIZE

Symposium at the GHI, November 14, 2008. Conveners: David Blackbourn (President, Friends of the GHI) and Hartmut Berghoff (GHI). Participants: Marti Lybeck (University of Wisconsin Lacrosse).

The Friends of the German Historical Institute convened in Washington on November 14, 2008, for their seventeenth annual symposium, chaired by David Blackbourn. At this year’s meeting, the Fritz Stern Dissertation Prize— for the best dissertation in German history completed at a North American university—was awarded to Marti Lybeck for her dissertation “Gender, Sexuality, and Belonging: Female Homosexuality in Germany, 1890–1933.” Lybeck earned her doctorate at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 2007, where her dissertation was supervised by Kathleen Canning and Geoff Eley. Fritz Stern attended the award ceremony and gave a comment. The Stern Prize Selection Committee was composed of Mary Jo Maynes (University of Minnesota), George S. Williamson (University of Alabama), and Jonathan Zatlin (Boston University).

David Blackbourn read out the committee’s award citation: “Marti Lybeck has written an original and provocative study of female homosexuality at two points of German history—the late Kaiserreich and the Weimar Era. The dissertation pursues three analytic lines laid out in a theoretically ambitious introduction: the history of the construction of the self; the history of homosexuality and its parts (for example, ‘female masculinity’); and change over time in how homosexuality was articulated as an identity and discussed in contemporary sources. Lybeck uses a series of case studies to develop her arguments. One case, for example, involves an analysis of Wedekind’s dramatic explorations of sexuality and of the police and public responses to them. Another focuses on locally notorious incidents of Weimar-era women civil servants and professionals who brought scandalous charges of homosexuality in women-centered workplaces. The diversity of the cases requires Lybeck to use a broad array of sources: personal narratives such as autobiographies and letters, fiction and drama, police records from several cities, newspapers, and local court and administrative case materials. Throughout the thesis, Lybeck is careful to historicize and deconstruct the terms she uses. Her refusal to look at the evidence of the past through the lens of sexual identities developed in the late twentieth century is persistent and admirable. Her deeply historical sensitivity to social categories yields fascinating insights into the history of homosexuality, gender, and selfhood in modern Germany.”
Following the award, Marti Lybeck presented an overview of her dissertation. Her work, she explained, analyzes the role of sexuality and gender identification in the processes of emancipation in four micro histories. Two of the case studies, the first generation of women students at Swiss universities and avant garde feminists in Munich, unfold in the intellectual ferment of the turn of the twentieth century. The other two, women organized into homosexual organizations and women civil servants, were new figures in the pressurized milieu of Weimar Germany. In both periods, Lybeck argued, gender was central to broader debates and anxieties about social order and national strength. Using highly personal sources, including diaries, narratives, and letters, her analysis aims at recovering the process of self-fashioning. The Weimar case studies also employ archival records of disciplinary cases in which female civil servants were accused of homosexuality and the debates and editorials of periodicals published by the homosexual movement. Detailed analysis is designed to crack apart the sexually charged figures of the New Woman and the homosexual to reveal the complexities and conflicts that such images contain. The case studies are situated within the context of public discussions of female homosexuality through theater reception, legal reform, censorship, and scandal journalism. Although as writers Lybeck’s historical subjects belonged to the intellectual elite among their groups, most of them were ordinary women without cultural or political significance. Studying them, Lybeck concluded, extends our knowledge of how such women received the elite discourses of their periods and how they perceived their position in relation to the state, the nation, society, and culture. An article offering a more detailed overview of Lybeck’s dissertation is featured in this issue of the Bulletin.

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